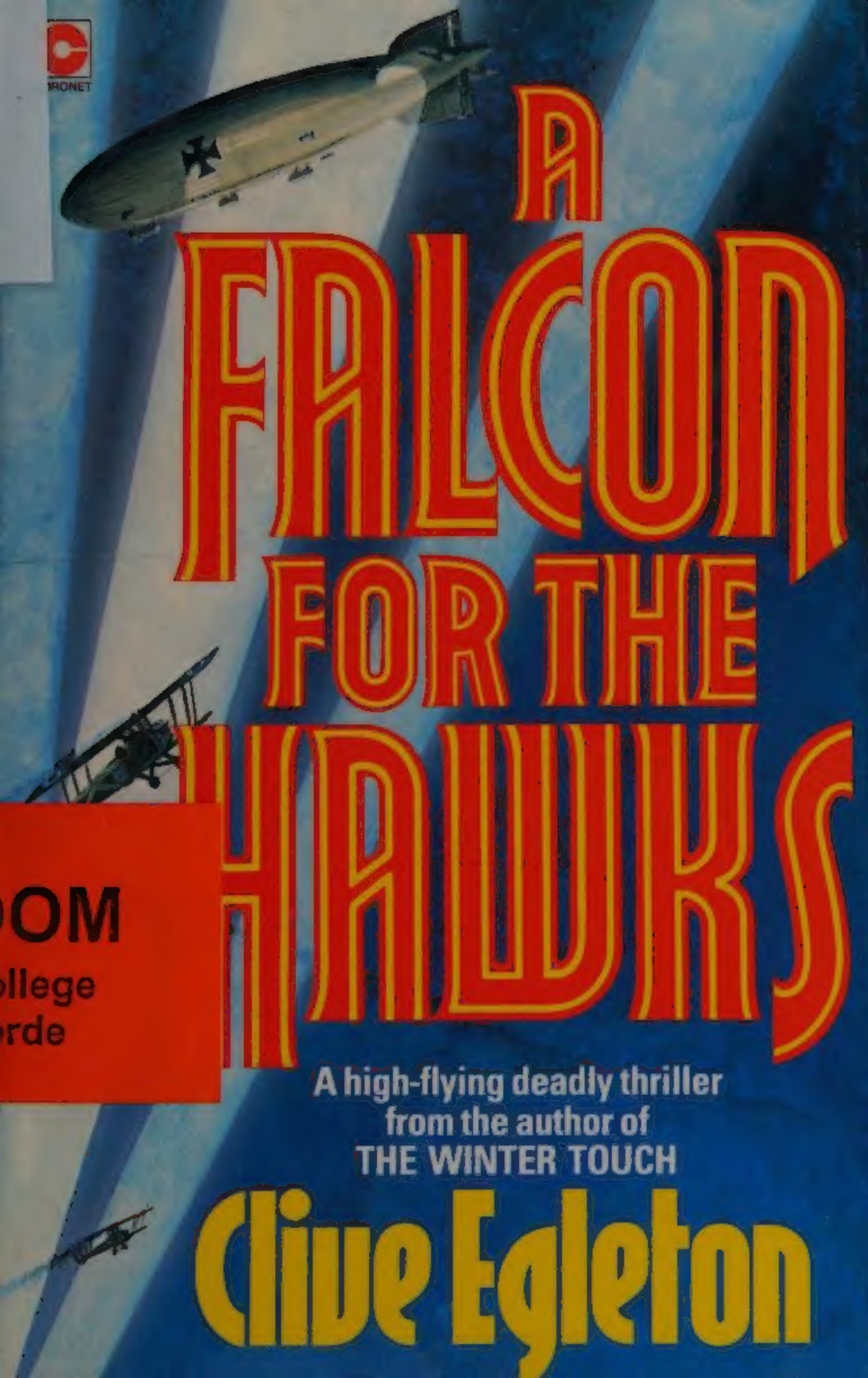
A FALCON FOR THE HAWKS
A high-flying deadly thriller
from the author of
THE WINTER TOUCH
Clive Egleton

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A FALCON FOR THE HAWKS

"The ship is out of control, Herr Oberleutnant," Ehrlich said in a flat voice that was at odds with the horrified expression on his face.

Gayer reacted instinctively and reached for the toggle ropes above Ehrlich's head. There were fourteen rubberised ballast sacks strung beneath the keel, each containing two thousand pounds of water, and he began to empty them one by one.

The babble of voices died away when Wenke gave the order to stop all engines. The air-speed indicator fell back but the altimeter went on unwinding and Wenke saw that they were already down to 9500 feet. He checked the inclinometer and then looked enquiringly to Gayer.

"Nine degrees, Friedrich?" Wenke nodded. "How many ballast sacks have you emptied?"

"Six."

Twelve thousand pounds; almost half the total they were carrying. Wenke frowned. How many more pounds would they need to bring the ship back on to an even keel?

Also by the same author,
and available in Coronet Books:

Skirmish
The Winter Touch

A Falcon For The Hawks

Clive Egleton

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder and Stoughton

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First published in Great Britain 1982
by Hodder and Stoughton Ltd

Coronet edition 1984

British Library C.I.P.

Egleton, Clive
A falcon for the hawks.
I. Title
823'.914[F] PR6055.G55

ISBN 0-340-34599-3

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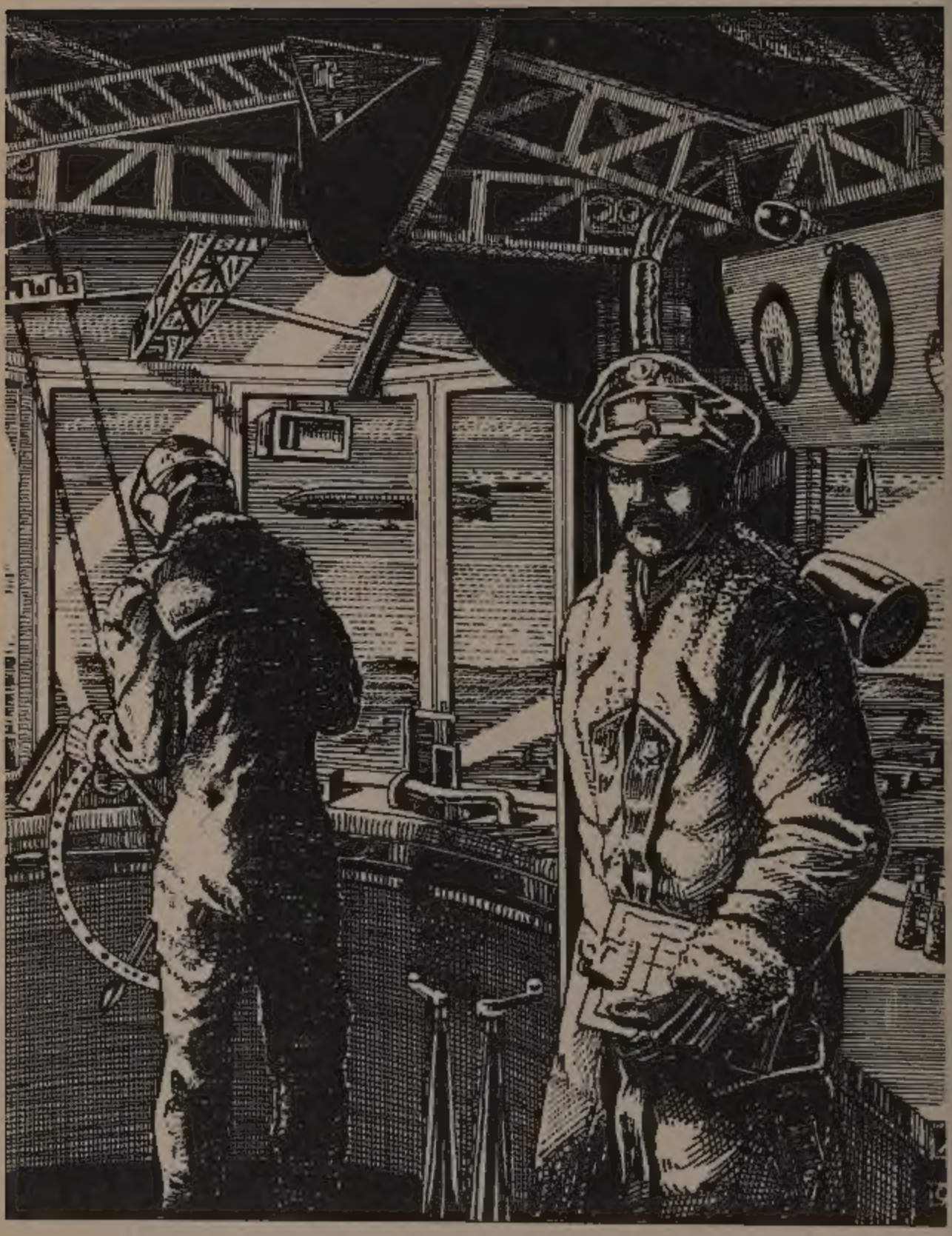
Printed and bound in Great Britain for Hodder and Stoughton Paperbacks, a division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent (Editorial Office: 47 Bedford Square, London, WC1 3DP) by Cox & Wyman Ltd., Reading

A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd and kill'd

Macbeth, Act 2

For J – at long last!



Monday, March 12th, 1917

2300 Hours

1

Hyatt flew on heading east above the sprawling, dimmed-out mass of London some 12,000 feet below. His fingers inside the leather gauntlets had lost all sense of touch and a cold paralysis gripped his body, chilling the blood beneath the layer of thick woollens he wore under his flying jacket. The altitude too was beginning to have its effect upon him; his pulse rate had gone up, there was a dull, nagging ache behind both eyes and he felt curiously light-headed, as though he'd had one drink too many.

The Zeppelin he was looking for had come in over the River Crouch on the east coast at 2200 hours and had made a wide sweep in order to approach the capital from the north. At midnight it had been heard over St Albans and ten minutes later, shortly after Hyatt had taken off from Saxon's Farm in his BE 2c, the Zeppelin had dropped two bombs on London Colney. Maintaining a south-easterly course roughly in line with the A6 trunk road, it had then released four 110-pounders on North Mimms, followed by a six sixty on Barnet.

The BE 2c climbed like a brick. With its ninety horse-power Renault engine, the fragile biplane took all of fifty minutes to reach its maximum altitude, and Hyatt was still some eight miles behind and several thousand feet below his quarry when the Zeppelin was momentarily lit up by a cluster of searchlights over Wood Green. For perhaps a full two minutes it had hung there like a giant sausage, seemingly motionless below the thick overcast, until the heavy four-inch anti-aircraft guns began to find its range. Then, with almost contemptuous ease, it had soared upwards to a sanctuary above the clouds.

The Zeppelin was still up there but, despite a short-lived feeling of guilt, Hyatt was only too thankful that the BE had already reached its maximum ceiling. Fresh from

training school at Bordon, this was his first operational sortie and with his limited experience of night flying, he was keenly aware that his navigation left a lot to be desired. Even now, with the Thames in clear view, Hyatt wasn't too sure of his exact position. The U-shaped loop below could be the bend in the river at Chiswick or even the Isle of Dogs for all he knew. "We don't want any schoolboy heroics," Farr had warned him before he took off. "Just keep an eye on the fuel gauge and allow yourself plenty of time to get back." Glancing at the crude instrument panel, Hyatt saw that the luminous needle was hovering around the quarter-full mark and calculated that he had twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes in hand. Slowly and very gingerly, he trimmed the rudder and made a wide hundred and eighty degree turn to head up river once more.

Away to the right, a series of orange-coloured flashes on the ground caught his eye and he looked northwards towards what at first sight appeared to be a huge lake. Bomb bursts south of the reservoirs near Walthamstow, he thought, and then, moments later, as if awakened from a light slumber, the searchlight battery at Finsbury Park came to life. Angrily, the groping fingers cleaved through the darkness to waver hesitantly until, guided by the attendant sound-locators, they moved with purpose and fastened on the Zeppelin.

It was, Hyatt decided, the chance of a lifetime. The Zeppelin was about four miles away on a roughly converging course and some 1200 feet below him. Banking sharply, he pushed the joystick forward and went into a steep dive, throttle wide open, the wind screaming in the struts and rigging of his frail machine. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the Zeppelin grew in size until it seemed to fill the entire horizon. Just about every anti-aircraft gun in London was firing at the intruder and, as he flew into the barrage, a machine gun spurted at him from the control car suspended under the hull.

The gesture of defiance surprised him and, reacting instinctively, Hyatt took his right hand off the joystick and reached for the Lewis gun mounted on the top wing.

Then, recalling the diagrams Farr had drawn on the blackboard, he held his fire. "Come in straight and level under the belly, angle the Lewis upwards and rake the Zeppelin from nose to stern. A million cubic feet of hydrogen and Mr Brock and Mr Pomeroy's incendiary ammunition will do the rest. Only don't imitate the moth and get too close to the candle, otherwise you'll fry." The textbook solution, one which Hyatt now followed to the letter, even though Farr had freely admitted that he'd never had the opportunity to put it to the test. Levelling out two hundred feet below the Zeppelin, he took aim and squeezed the trigger.

The Lewis gun chattered briefly, spewing less than a dozen rounds from the drum magazine before it jammed. Mouthing obscenities, Hyatt kicked the rudder hard over and banked sharply, intending to make a tight turn so that he could keep the target in sight while he changed the magazine, but his machine behaved like a drunkard, side-slipping and losing height rapidly. As he hauled back on the joystick, the RPM fell off alarmingly and for a sickening moment he thought he was going to stall. Relief flooded through him as the engine picked up again and he started to climb.

Looking up, he was surprised to find that the Zeppelin was at least a thousand feet above him. It was still caught in the tangled web of searchlights but in a nose-up attitude. Suddenly, a huge waterfall spouted from its stern and Hyatt guessed that the German commander had ordered the elevator man in the control car to empty some of the rubber ballast sacks. Lighter now, it rose swiftly, its rate of ascent soon matching, then gradually surpassing, that of his BE.

The separation distance widened, a thousand feet becoming fifteen hundred in a matter of seconds, but even so, the target was still in range. A six-engine job, bigger than the 'R' type; one of the giant height climbers that had become an obsession with Farr and were said to be twice the size of a football pitch from nose to stern. Control car, two gondolas midships, port and starboard, and a stern engine gondola; the details impressed them-

selves on Hyatt as he struggled to remove the magazine on the Lewis gun. Unable to budge it, he throttled back, levelled out again and unclipped his harness. Tearing the gloves from his hands, he stood up in the cockpit and, taking a firm grip on the drum magazine, twisted it against the spring load. It moved a mere fraction of an inch before the threads crossed and held it fast.

The starboard wing dropped and, losing his balance, his knee inadvertently brushed the joystick to give full right flap and the airplane slowly rolled over on to its back. He began to slide from the cockpit and, screaming like a madman, Hyatt flailed his legs, seeking a toe hold under the instrument panel. A foot smashed through the fascia but the hole wasn't big enough to give him any purchase. His arms felt as if they were being torn from their sockets, and he closed his eyes and prayed the magazine would hold because only a thin strip of low tensile steel could save him from certain death.

Buffeted by the slipstream, he began to swing back and forth like a man on a circus trapeze. Fighting against the pull of gravity, he tried to haul himself up to the Lewis gun, imitating the kind of exercise he'd performed in the gymnasium of Radley College not so very long ago. Eyes bulging, lips spread in a ghastly caricature of a smile by the wind, his arms trembling under the strain, Hyatt inched himself upwards. The sharp underside rim of the drum magazine cut into his numbed fingers, the blood trickling into his palms and making it difficult for him to hang on.

Desperate now, he leaned backwards, tucked both knees into his stomach and then straightened his legs, thrusting them into the cockpit. One good kick at the rudder controls, that's all he had to do now, he said to himself, and with any luck the plane would right itself. But luck had deserted him. The drum sagged, the low tensile steel thread sheared off and suddenly he was falling, his arms and legs splayed out like a starfish, the darkness closing in around him.

The BE rolled over, the nose dropped, and with the engine still running on half throttle, it spiralled towards

the ground 10,000 feet below, the canvas shredding, the wings collapsing and folding back against the fuselage. The spars snapped in two as if they were matchwood and the tailplane broke off. Still whirling in ever-widening circles, the stricken aircraft finally ploughed into the Hackney Marshes and sank beneath the ooze.

An elderly War Reserve police constable patrolling the streets of Bow found Hyatt shortly after daybreak the following morning. It was, however, some time before he associated the misshapen object buried in the roof of St. Stephen's Church with a human being.

Thursday, March 22nd, 1917

0600 Hours
to
1330 Hours

2

Farr checked the pockets of his flying jacket to make sure he had everything he needed, then, pushing the tent flap aside, he stepped out into the chill morning air. Commissioned into the King's Royal Rifle Corps in June 1912, Matthew Farr was one of the few 'Old Contemptibles' to have survived the retreat from Mons, the confusion of Le Cateau and the slaughterhouse of Loos. Along the way he had picked up a Military Cross and a bullet through the calf of his right leg which had left him with a slight limp. Discharged from hospital in November 1915, he had transferred to the Royal Flying Corps with the willing assent of the aircrew medical selection board, whose members were not inclined to be too finicky about a trifling leg wound. Four months later he was back in France, flying reconnaissance missions out of St Omer in the two-seater version of the BE. Chances were that he would still be stationed at St Omer now were it not for the fact that he'd happened to be on home leave in June 1916 when the Zeppelins had started raiding London in earnest and the War Office had grabbed him to form a scratch air defence squadron.

Some squadron, Farr thought, looking at the assortment of aircraft lined up on the far side of the grass field: two flights instead of the usual three, one equipped with BE 2s, the other with two-seater FE pushers. The BEs should have been consigned to a museum long ago and the pushers resembled a flying junkyard, the pilot seated behind and above the observer/gunner, the engine at his back and nothing between the wings and the tailplane except four tubular-shaped booms and their bracing struts. And the pilots weren't exactly top line either; novices, all of them, with the exception of Broadhurst commanding 'A' Flight and Second Lieutenant Frank

Lethbridge, the amiable, fair-haired, twenty-four-year-old American who'd left the family law firm in New York to join the RFC.

Farr checked his wristwatch. Lethbridge might be a damned good pilot but he was a lousy time keeper. He was already ten minutes late. No point getting worked up about it though; Corporal Wilson had only just finished marking out the flight deck with tracing tape and the mechanics still had to manoeuvre the BE into position between the tramlines.

"They do tell me it's going to be a fine day, Major." Lethbridge ambled towards him, both hands deep in the pockets of his fawn-coloured breeches. "Can't believe it myself with all this mist around."

"You don't know our weather, Frank. The mist is lifting all the time. Ten minutes from now, it will have disappeared entirely."

"Yeah?" Lethbridge sounded doubtful. "What's the outlook for tonight?"

"Visibility good, light variable winds five to ten knots – Zeppelin weather." Farr dug a crumpled message form out of his pocket and passed it to the American. "Air Defence Headquarters has summoned me to London for a conference at ten o'clock this morning. They're expecting eight, possibly ten raiders tonight."

"That's some crystal ball they've got."

"Read the signal. Our Intelligence people reckon the Zeppelin bases at Nordholtz and Alhorn are on full alert." Farr shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, they could be wrong but the weather has been bad for the past ten days and the Boche will want to hit us hard before the next full moon tomorrow night."

"Let's hope you're right. I'm getting tired of sitting around on my butt waiting for something to happen."

It was a familiar complaint. As Lethbridge was for ever pointing out, he hadn't crossed the Atlantic Ocean to sit out the war at Saxon's Farm, twenty miles from London in rural Hertfordshire. Usually the observation was accompanied by written application for a transfer to the Western Front.

"Where's the latest transfer request then?" Farr said, voicing his thoughts aloud.

"I handed it into the Orderly Room a few minutes ago."

"I shall tear it up, of course."

"Yeah, I know you will." Lethbridge smiled crookedly. "Good men are hard to come by."

"Hyatt has gone," Farr said tersely. "We buried him a week ago, but there are plenty more like him."

There was Yarborough, barely twenty years old and full of boyish enthusiasm but lethal in the cockpit of an FE. Rumour had it that his sergeant observer, a long-suffering man by the name of Jarvis, wrote a farewell letter to his wife before every take-off and blessed the Pope each time he returned safely. Then there was Allchurch who was no good at judging heights and couldn't make a decent landing to save his life. Yesterday, he'd come in too fast and bounced like a kangaroo; a wheel had broken off and the plane had slewed across the field, missing the fitters' marquee by a whisker before it ploughed into a hedgerow.

"Corporal Wilson is giving you a thumbs up." Lethbridge cleared his throat noisily. "Do you mind telling me what this test flight is all about?" he asked.

"Not at all." Farr took out his flying helmet, slipped it on over his head and buttoned the chinstrap. "You see those two white tramlines marked out on the grass? They're sixty feet apart. If I can take off inside that distance, we can bomb Nordholtz."

"How?"

"From a barge in the middle of the North Sea."

"That should catch them with their pants down," Lethbridge said dryly.

"That's the whole idea."

Farr pulled on his leather gauntlets, fished a pair of goggles from the pocket of his flying jacket and strode off towards the BE. Without actually saying so, Lethbridge had managed to imply that he'd taken leave of his senses. But the American was wrong. It was a feasible operation and he was damn well going to prove it. This new class of Zeppelin could fly higher and faster than any of the

so-called night fighters they were equipped with and there was only one way to get even. They had to catch the bastards on the ground and burn them in their sheds.

Farr quickened his stride, eager to put his idea to the test. The ground crew were ready and waiting for him. Wilson had chocked the undercarriage of the BE and two of the three airmen with him were standing by to hold the tailplane down. Acknowledging Wilson's smart salute with a casual wave, he climbed into the cockpit and fastened the seat belt across his stomach.

"Does everyone know what to do, Corporal?" he asked, much as an afterthought.

Wilson nodded. "We don't move until you drop your arm, sir."

"Good," said Farr. "Here we go then, shit or bust. Switches off."

"Switches off," Wilson repeated mechanically.

"Petrol on."

"Petrol on."

"Suck in."

"Suck in." Wilson swung the prop twice. "Switches on."

"Switches on." Farr tripped the ignition and then yelled, "Contact."

"Contact," said Wilson and swung the prop again.

The engine caught and ran hesitantly. Juggling with the throttle, Farr coaxed it into life until finally all eight cylinders were firing in sequence. He checked the temperature and oil pressure gauges; then, leaning over the side of the cockpit, he signalled Lethbridge to watch the distant tramline. He pulled the goggles down over his eyes and opened the throttle, building the revs until the plane, shaking like an aspen leaf, was straining to get away from the crude chocks that Corporal Wilson had placed under the wheels.

Farr raised his right arm high above his head and then dropped it suddenly. Both chocks were withdrawn, the two airmen holding the tail down let go, and the plane shot forward. Finesse counted for nothing; exerting all his strength, Farr yanked the stick back, hoping that by sheer brute force he could haul the nose up. The BE rose

sluggishly into the air, the wheels barely two feet above the ground as he thundered past the double line of bell tents towards the hedgerow at the bottom end of the field.

He was beyond the point of no return now and Farr couldn't see how he was going to miss the hedgerow but, at the last moment, his plane reared up like a startled horse to clear the obstacles with mere inches to spare. Thereafter the BE behaved itself and climbed steadily. Levelling off at 200 feet, he turned back and circled the field. It seemed that most of the squadron had turned out to watch him and amongst the crowd of upturned faces, Lethbridge was clearly visible, waving both arms aloft in triumph.

The naval airship base at Nordholtz was the most depressing place Oberleutnant-zur-See Friedrich von Gayer had ever seen. An expanse of sandy scrub between the Elbe estuary and the railway line to Bremerhaven, it was, in his opinion, the most dreary and Godforsaken station in the entire Navy. A headquarters block, six barrack huts, the officers' mess, a cookhouse, the guard-room, latrines and ablutions; that's all there was to Nordholtz. Plus, of course, the four Zeppelin sheds; hideous monstrosities which for no apparent rhyme or reason were sited diametrically opposite one another on axes running south-west to north-east and north-west to south-east.

Gayer moved away from the window, sat down on the edge of his bed and lit a cigarette. Joining the Naval Air Division had been a quixotic gesture, one that he now bitterly regretted. Resentment, a misplaced sense of duty and two men, Konteradmiral Paul Behnecke and his grandfather, Baron von Gayer, were largely responsible for that momentous and stupid decision.

The resentment had always been there. From the day he'd joined the Navy, his grandfather had planned and stage-managed his career. Against his wishes, the Baron had arranged for him to be transferred from the battle-cruiser *Derfflinger* to a staff job in Berlin in May 1914. The

misplaced sense of duty had arisen two years later when the ever-lengthening casualty lists had finally convinced him that it would be cowardly to spend the rest of the war behind a desk. Sea-going appointments were difficult to obtain and the routine Admiralty Instruction advising that there were a number of vacancies for officers of his seniority in the Naval Air Division had seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Konteradmiral Behnecke, the Deputy Chief of Staff, had done the rest, endorsing his application before he had a chance to change his mind.

None of the instructors at the Zeppelin training establishment had thought to mention the increasing number of casualties resulting from accidents and enemy action but once he joined the squadron at Nordholtz, Gayer had soon realised just what he'd let himself in for. Too proud to ask his grandfather to arrange a posting to a less hazardous appointment, he had steeled himself to face death obstinately if not cheerfully.

A staccato tapping noise intruded upon his thoughts and then August Koch stuck his head round the door and said, "It's ten past eight, Friedrich."

"So?"

"So you'd better get a move on if you want any breakfast. Strasser will have you marking time in his office if you're late for the briefing."

Fregattenkapitan Peter Strasser: now, there was a man he'd learned to avoid as often as possible, a fanatical visionary with a caustic tongue. Under his leadership, the Naval Air Division had become a strategic bombing force, despite opposition from those admirals who wished to relegate the airship to scouting patrols in support of the fleet.

"I'm not hungry, August." He never was before a raid. This morning he'd woken up with stomach cramps and the sour taste of bile in his mouth.

"You haven't missed anything," said Koch. "The bread rolls were stale and the coffee was yesterday's warmed up."

Gayer smiled. It was a gross libel. The civilian population might be feeling the pinch but the Zeppelin crews

still lived off the fat of the land. There would have been freshly-baked bread, ham, cheese and hard-boiled eggs for breakfast this morning. And real coffee, not the ersatz stuff made from acorns. Koch was merely trying to be tactful. The thirty-four-year-old navigator and junior lieutenant from Hamburg knew he had the wind up but he was determined to ignore it.

"Cheer up, Friedrich. Thursday will soon be here."

"What?"

"We're going on leave the day after tomorrow." Koch moved into the room and flopped down in an armchair. "Ten whole days."

"I've heard that rumour before."

"This time it's official, up there in black and white on the notice board in the mess ante-room."

"In that case, all we need is some bad weather between now and Thursday." Gayer reached for the ashtray on the bedside table and stubbed out his cigarette. "Like gale force winds," he added.

"Put your trust in Kapitanleutnant Carl-Ernst Wenke, Friedrich – he'll bring us home safe and sound. He always has up to now."

True, Gayer thought, very true. Wenke was not the most impressive-looking Zeppelin commander on the base but he was easily the best. After Heinrich Matty had gone down in flames over Potters Bar, this swarthy, diminutive but pugnacious man had become the undisputed ace of the Naval Air Division. Gayer was grateful for small mercies these days and thought himself damned lucky to be Wenke's executive officer.

"We ought to be on our way." Koch tapped the face of his wristwatch. "Time's moving on."

"Yes, I suppose it is." Gayer reached for his peaked cap on the seat of an upright chair and jammed it on his head. "How do I look?" he asked.

"Very dashing," said Koch. "Now, for God's sake, let's get a shift on."

Wenke strolled towards the headquarters block, his hands clasped together behind his back, a habit he'd

unconsciously acquired from observing Fregattenkapitan Strasser.

"This will be the biggest raid of the war, Carl," Strasser said enthusiastically. "Twelve Zeppelins – four from Nordholtz, three each from Alhorn and Tondern and two from Wittmundhaven."

"That's quite an armada."

"It most certainly is. The airships from Tondern and Wittmundhaven will feint towards the Midlands while you lead the main force against London."

"What are our targets?" Wenke asked quietly.

"Woolwich Arsenal, the munitions factory at Silvertown and the government offices in Whitehall. Strictly military objectives, but of course we both know that some bombs are bound to go astray."

"And there will be the usual outcry about baby-killers in the English newspapers."

"There won't be any recriminations here." Strasser smiled. "Things have changed since the old days. Remember how it was in the beginning, Carl? The trouble we had with the Kaiser?"

Wenke nodded. Kaiser Wilhelm had been very reluctant to authorise the bombing of London and had imposed a number of restrictions. They had been forbidden to bomb the city centre for fear of hitting Buckingham Palace, and the Emperor, for all his warlike utterances, had compiled a list of ancient monuments which they were to avoid at all costs. Almost a year had passed before the Kaiser could be persuaded to remove some of the more irksome restrictions he had imposed, and even then he had stipulated that, on humanitarian grounds, the commercial heart of the city could be attacked only at weekends when the office buildings were unoccupied. Of course, it had only been a temporary impasse; under mounting pressure the Emperor had finally given way on that point too.

"This raid has got to be a success, Carl. We're running out of time."

"Oh? Why so?"

"Because the Army is forming a squadron of Gothas to

strike against England." Strasser pushed the swing door open and walked into the headquarters building ahead of Wenke. "They will be based on three airfields near Ghent, which will put them well within range of London. I understand that the bomb load of three Gothas is equal to one of our Zeppelins."

There was no need for Strasser to elaborate. The big twin-engined Gothas were faster and could fly in formation. At the height of the air offensive in 1916, the Navy had never succeeded in getting more than two Zeppelins over London on a single night.

"It's make or break for us, Carl."

"Yes, I can see that," Wenke said, and followed Strasser into the briefing room.

As one man, thirty-five officers leapt to their feet and stood to attention.

3

Farr pushed back the cuff of his khaki jacket and stared pointedly at his wristwatch. The conference at Air Defence Headquarters had been going on for almost an hour now and he thought it was about time Lieutenant Colonel Sewell brought the proceedings to a close. The Intelligence officer had assessed the potential threat and possible enemy intentions. The civilian expert from the Met section had produced the latest weather forecast. The whole of the Midlands and Southern England had been divided into sectors and every squadron commander knew just how many patrols he was required to find. They'd been given their orders and all the information they needed and this heated argument going on between Toby Wharton, who commanded 523 Squadron at Reigate, and the artillery liaison officer was a bloody waste of

time. Wharton wasn't the first pilot to have returned to base with his plane riddled by shell splinters, nor would he be the last.

The slanging match had been allowed to run on too long, but Sewell was strangely reticent. Perhaps, Farr thought, he felt he wasn't qualified to adjudicate. Sewell was an infantryman pure and simple and made no secret of the fact that he wasn't proud of the red tabs on the lapels of his tunic. He was a line officer not a staff mandarin, but the Somme had done for him; one fine morning in July, eight months ago, he'd lost an arm, the sight of one eye and the greater part of his right heel.

"We seem to be going round in circles," Sewell said plaintively. "What exactly do you expect from the gunners, Wharton?"

"I expect them to observe the rules. Any Zeppelin below 12,000 feet is our bird. They can blaze away to their heart's content for all I care, just so long as the target is above that altitude."

A tear trickled down Sewell's cheek. Removing his glass eye, he wiped the angry red socket with a handkerchief and then replaced it. "What's your opinion, Farr?" he asked tersely.

"It's all very well in theory but it's not practical." Farr paused, giving himself time to marshal his thoughts. "The sound locators, the searchlights and the anti-aircraft batteries are linked by telephone. They can work together as a team, but we can't. The moment we take off, we're blind men groping in the dark, unable to communicate with anybody. So, if the gunners find a target, I think they should engage it no matter what."

Wharton swivelled round to face him, anger clouding his long, horse-like features. "And we've just got to take our chances?" His voice rose an octave. "Is that what you're saying, Farr?"

"I would have thought that was obvious," Farr said coldly. "Maybe one day in the future we'll be able to talk to the ground defences by radio, but until that happens, we've just got to make the best of it. If we insist on restricting the gunners to certain altitudes, we'll be giving

the Zeppelins a free ride over London."

"I couldn't agree more." Sewell picked up a ruler and rapped the table. "End of discussion." He smiled fleetingly. "End of conference too."

A dozen chairs scraped the floor; Wharton glared at Farr, the artillery liaison officer looked suitably grateful. Farr nodded back, moved to the window and stood there gazing out across Horse Guards' Parade towards St James's Park while the room slowly emptied.

"Admiring the view?" Sewell asked presently.

Farr turned about. "Can you spare me a couple of minutes, Colonel?"

"If it's about Hyatt's replacement, that's all been taken care of. A Lieutenant Moorhouse will be joining you late this afternoon after he's collected a reconditioned BE from the aircraft park at Farnborough."

"Another fledgling from the training school at Bordon?"

"No. Just for a change, you're getting an experienced pilot."

"I see." Farr clucked his tongue, then said, "What's wrong with him?"

"Moorhouse used to be a fighter pilot. He got shot through the neck in a dog fight with Lieutenant Max Immelmann sometime in December '15." Sewell shuffled his papers together one-handed, a task he performed with considerable dexterity. "His nerves aren't all they might be."

It was another way of saying that Moorhouse was next to useless as a combat pilot. He would probably turn tail and run for home the moment he sighted a Fokker. Cowardice in the face of the enemy; that was the usual charge, and for that you could end up facing a firing squad. Somebody had wanted to spare Moorhouse that fate and had posted him to a Home Defence Squadron. As a night fighter pilot, he could avoid combat whenever he had the wind up and nobody would ever know.

"Actually, I wasn't about to raise the matter of Hyatt's replacement." Farr unbuttoned a pocket on his tunic and took out three typewritten sheets of foolscap which he'd

stapled together and folded in half. "I really wanted you to read this."

"What is it?" Sewell asked suspiciously.

"A plan for bombing the Zeppelin sheds at Nordholtz."

"You're supposed to be a fighter pilot."

"That's why I wrote the paper. It's a popular belief that we've got the measure of the Zeppelin, but I know we haven't. The Germans have got the edge on us with this giant height climber they've produced; the damned thing can soar up to 20,000 feet, maybe more. But, luckily for us, they appear to have only one of this new class operational at present."

He had seen it twice: once the previous September and then again the night Hyatt had been killed when it had been momentarily lit up by the searchlights at Finsbury Park. Last September he'd been close enough to see the registration number, L72 – he wasn't likely to forget that Zeppelin in a hurry.

"The Boche usually descend below the cloud base when they make their bombing run, Farr."

"Up to now they have. But the more we improve our defences, the more likely they are to stay above the overcast and drop their load indiscriminately."

Farr had a point, Sewell thought. It could only be a question of time before the Boche adopted the tactics he'd suggested, and then the whole picture would change dramatically. Frowning, Sewell began to read Farr's proposal. The typing left a lot to be desired; although most of the more glaring errors had been blocked out, a number of spelling mistakes had slipped through.

"You've got a lousy clerk," he muttered.

"I typed it myself," said Farr, "with two fingers."

"Looks like it too. What's all this nonsense about a barge?"

"We build a platform sixty feet long on top of a lighter; then we get a destroyer to tow it out into the North Sea, within flying range of Nordholtz. We'll use incendiaries to set the Zeppelin sheds alight. That should make one hell of a bang."

"Can you get a BE airborne within sixty feet?"

Farr nodded. "I did it this morning. We chocked the wheels and two men held the tail down while I ran the engine up until the plane was straining at the leash. Of course, the barge will need to be several cable lengths behind the destroyer. I mean, we don't want any of our pilots flying straight into a gun turret, do we?"

"Pilots?" Sewell turned his good eye to stare at Farr. "Just how many aircraft and destroyers are you planning to use?" he asked faintly.

"Four of each," said Farr, "plus a few cruisers. We'll be steaming off the German Bight so it's just possible that Admiral Scheer may swallow the bait and order the High Seas Fleet to leave harbour." He grinned. "At least, that's how I think we should sell this idea to the Admiralty."

It was, Sewell thought, a very original and audacious plan. No doubt the War Office would say that it smacked of Jules Verne, and with the U-boats sinking every merchantman in sight, the Admiralty would be reluctant to divert any of their precious destroyers from hunting them down. Still, as Farr had pointed out, the High Seas Fleet might be tempted to come out and that could be enough to persuade the First Sea Lord that the plan had some merit.

"But why Nordholtz?" he asked, frowning.

"Because I'm sure that's where the L72 is based."

Sewell bit his lip. He was losing his grip. Less than three months ago they'd received information that the 'Normann' shed on the north-west corner of the field had been extended by an additional hundred feet. The work had started in June and had been completed two months later. The source had been graded A1, meaning that the informant was extremely reliable and the information almost certainly correct. He also recalled that Farr had been present at that particular Intelligence briefing.

"All right, Matthew," he said presently. "I'll send this plan of yours on to the War Office. I can't promise anything but I'll certainly bend a few ears."

That was as much as he could have hoped for, Farr thought as he thanked Sewell.

Leaving the conference room on the second floor, he

ran lightly down the stairs and, turning left, made his way out into Whitehall where he flagged down a taxi cab.

Farr paid off the taxi and looked up at the Nash Terrace house in Seaton Square where Laura Theobalds lived with her parents. Before the war there had been a staff of ten to look after the big town house, but now her mother was trying to run the place and keep up appearances with just an elderly butler, a cook, a scullery girl and a lady's maid. The two footmen, the chauffeur and the gardener-cum-handyman had disappeared into the Army in August '14 Sir Henry Theobalds had literally marched them into the nearest recruiting office in a fit of patriotic fervour. Had he known then that both upstairs maids would subsequently find more lucrative employment in a munitions factory, his enthusiasm for King and Country might have been tempered with a little prudence.

Farr climbed the short flight of steps and pulled the bell. That there was no immediate response didn't surprise him. Parker was getting on in years and there were times when the very elderly butler forgot that he no longer had two footmen to do the menial jobs around the house. When finally he did answer the door, the old man stared at him as if he were a stranger.

"Hullo, Parker," he said. "Don't you remember me?"

Recognition came with a slow smile. "Why, it's Major Farr," he said warmly. "You're looking very well, sir, if I may say so."

"And you, Parker. Is Miss Laura at home?"

"I believe she's in the library, sir."

"Good." Farr removed his peaked cap and stepped into the hall. "I'd rather you didn't announce me, Parker," he said. "I want this to be a surprise."

The old man obviously didn't approve; he could tell that from the expression on his face. It was not correct etiquette; young ladies did not converse with young men unless they were properly chaperoned. But Parker's world had changed and society with it; 1913, when Laura Theobalds had been presented at court, was now ancient history.

Laura was hunched over the writing desk at the far end of the room. Preoccupied with her correspondence, it was some moments before she realised that she had a visitor and spun round to face him.

"Matthew." Pleasure showed in her voice, in her welcoming smile and in her eyes. "This is a pleasant surprise; you're the very last person I expected to see. What are you doing in London?"

"I had to attend a conference." Farr moved towards her, thinking how very desirable she looked in the green silk dress that matched her eyes and complemented her auburn hair. "As I was so near," he added, "I decided to call round on the off-chance of seeing you."

"And you find me quite alone."

"Really?" He kissed her lightly on the cheek and then drew up a chair. "Where are your parents?" he asked.

"Father's up in Rutland inspecting the estate and mother's attending another of her committee meetings. This time she's helping to organise a flag day in aid of the Serbian refugees on Corfu." Laura smiled and glanced at the neat pile of envelopes on the desk. "I've been given a list of influential people who Mother thinks will be good for a generous donation."

"You can put me down for a fiver."

"Oh, I couldn't do that."

"I insist," Farr said firmly. "You'd take it from Giles like a shot."

"That's different – he's my brother."

"Well, we're pretty close too," Farr said, crossing two fingers. "Almost like brothers."

He and Giles had been new boys together at Oundle, same house, same dormitory. The two families had met at the first open day, in the summer of 1905. Laura had been ten years old then, a spindly little girl with braces on her teeth and four years their junior. She had certainly blossomed since those far off days.

"Have you heard from Giles recently?" he asked.

Laura nodded. "A fortnight ago. He managed a few days in Cairo while his battalion was out of the line. Poor Giles, he was never cut out to be a soldier."

Laura was absolutely right. Giles had been the sloppiest member of the Officers' Training Corps at Oundle, the bane of the drill sergeant's life, his puttees for ever unwinding, his uniform creased and baggy. But for the war, Giles would never have donned khaki again. And if it hadn't been for Laura, they would also have gone their separate ways after Oundle. Or would they? A bond had been forged between their respective families during those five early formative years. There had been weekends at Green Acres, the Theobalds' country house in Rutland, and Cranbourne, the Farrs' home in Nottingham. And Salcombe on the Devonshire coast the first fortnight in August every summer until 1914.

"Did you go to Salcombe this year, Laura?" he asked.

"For a week. But it wasn't the same, Matthew."

Farr avoided her gaze. Nothing was the same; the halcyon days had gone for ever. He remembered long summer evenings at Salcombe and his growing awareness of Laura, the gradual and surprising discovery that she was no longer a gawky schoolgirl who happened to be Giles' sister but a very lovely, highly intelligent and singularly determined young woman. And Laura had needed to be determined to overcome her father's objections when she'd announced that she was going to join the Voluntary Aid Detachment and become an auxiliary nurse. And it had needed every bit of her determination and courage to put up with the kind of treatment she and the other VADs had received from the professional nurses at the Army Base Hospital in Clerkenwell.

"Do you ever see any of the girls who were with you at the base hospital these days?"

"First Salcombe, now Clerkenwell." Laura smiled and shook her head. "I suppose there is a connection?"

"You're the connection," Farr told her.

"Oh." Laura lowered her eyes and played with a button on her dress. "Well, as a matter of fact, Jane Carmichael was here the other day. Remember her? A short, rather plump VAD with brown wavy hair and a lisp."

"I think so." Farr couldn't place her but then he hadn't been interested in the other VADs. The one good thing

about getting wounded at Loos was the fact that he'd ended up at Clerkenwell. A fantastic stroke of luck that, one that had enabled him to see Laura whenever she wasn't on duty. Alone, without a chaperone.

"Anyway, Jane's off to France next week."

"Is she really?"

Farr didn't give a damn where Jane Carmichael was going or what happened to her. He wished he'd never mentioned Clerkenwell now, but at the time he'd thought it might help to bridge the gap between them. He'd wanted to remind Laura of the old days, of how close they'd been, but she seemed determined to keep him at arm's length. It was nobody's fault but things might have been very different if he hadn't listened to her father, if a year ago their engagement had been made official. "Laura is barely twenty-one," her father had said when he'd asked his permission to marry her, "and you're going back to France. Why not wait another year? The war may be over by then."

"What time do you have to report back to camp, Matthew?"

"I don't have to report to anybody," said Farr. "That's one of the privileges of being a commanding officer."

"Would you like to stay to lunch?"

"You know how much I would," he said quietly.

"Good." Laura started to get up. "I'll just ring for Parker."

"You stay there," Farr said quickly. "I can do that."

"No." Laura reacted angrily. "You're like everyone else, treating me like a cripple. I'm not completely helpless, you know."

Farr moved his chair out of the way so as to give Laura more space and tried not to watch her as she limped across the room. But he did. The dress was ankle length but it didn't hide the crude artificial foot. Wounded in action, he thought bitterly, on September 21st, 1916. The night he'd first seen the L72, the night that a 660-pound bomb from that same Zeppelin had landed in the grounds of the base hospital at Clerkenwell and demolished one wing of the nurses' home. The rescue services

had dug Laura out of the rubble the following morning and two hours later, the surgeons had amputated her right foot six inches above the ankle.

Laura pressed the bell-button, then turned awkwardly. "An ugly sight, isn't it?" she said, meeting his gaze.

"What is?"

"My right foot."

"To hell with your foot," said Farr. "I think you're the most beautiful woman in all London."

4

Gayer walked into the Normann shed and looked up at the vast bulk of the L72.

For sheer size this stretched version of the 'R' type was easily the most impressive Zeppelin in the entire fleet. From bow to stern the cigar-shaped hull measured 790 feet while the maximum diameter exceeded seventy-eight. Taller than a four-storey building and more than twice the length of a football pitch, the smooth exterior of the hull gave a misleading impression that it was simply an elongated balloon filled with air. In fact, the outer cover was laced on to a framework of Duralium girders and polygonal main rings braced with hard drawn steel wire, and within this gigantic birdcage there were twenty gas cells containing two and a quarter million cubic feet of hydrogen, which became explosive when contaminated by air. The keel, a triangular corridor running from end to end of the hull, was fitted with racks on either side beneath the outer cover to carry a maximum bomb load of five short tons. Also hanging from the sturdy box girders were fourteen rubberised water ballast sacks and forty aluminium slip tanks holding 2400 gallons of petrol. A catwalk, barely a foot wide, lay at the bottom of

the keel from which a vertical ladder rose to the exposed top gun platform above the bows.

"Good morning, Herr Oberleutnant." Warrant Officer Molders, the stocky, broad-shouldered chief engineer, came striding towards him from the far end of the shed, his footsteps muffled by rope-soled shoes. "I'm ready for inspection whenever you like, sir."

"Fine," said Gayer. "I'll be with you in a minute, Chief." He glanced at the slip of paper the armament artificer had given him earlier, and then moved aft.

High above his head, lamp cables dangled from the control car and engine gondolas, the 250-watt bulbs casting pools of light on the floor. He walked on slowly, his neck craned back, his lips moving as he counted the number of bombs in the external racks below the keel. Six heavies, forty 110-pounders and sixty thermite incendiaries; the load tallied with the figures he'd been given.

"I'll be glad when we've got rid of that little lot," Molders said, staring up at the pear-shaped 660-pounders.

"Me too." Gayer folded the slip of paper in half and shoved it into his jacket pocket. "All right, Chief," he said in a brisker voice, "let's have a look at your department."

Molders nodded and fell into step beside him. "I think you'll find everything is in order, Herr Oberleutnant."

"I'm sure I will," Gayer said with a tight smile.

Gayer wondered why he always felt ill at ease with the chief engineer. Perhaps it was because Molders was so obviously competent, so obviously sure of himself that it made him painfully aware of his own limitations. An Executive officer; that was his ceiling. If the war lasted another ten years, he would still be unfit for command. Grim-faced, he climbed up on to the dais facing the starboard side of the rear engine gondola, then stood to one side and waited for Molders to open the hatch for him.

The gondola was roughly the same size as the control car in the bows but far more cramped to Gayer's way of thinking. The three Maybach engines, arranged in the

shape of a letter 'V', with two mounted forrard and one aft, took up most of the available space, leaving precious little room for the chief engineer and the duty watch of three motor mechanics. All three Maybachs and the oil drip trays beneath them looked spotlessly clean to Gayer and he noted that the brass guardrails surrounding the engines had been polished until they shone like gold.

"The Maybachs are obviously in tip-top condition, Chief."

"Thank you, sir," Molders said woodenly.

Gayer scowled; there were no prizes for guessing how little value Molders attached to his opinion. The chief was right, of course; the internal combustion engine was a closed book so far as he was concerned. The two Maxim 7.92mm air-cooled machine guns were much more in his line; he could strip and reassemble them effortlessly, something Molders couldn't dò. Moving to the starboard gun, he pulled the butt into his shoulder, then elevated, traversed and depressed the Maxim to satisfy himself that the mounting and swivel joints had been thoroughly lubricated. The check completed, he tested the reel-type drum magazine to see if it was firmly locked into the receiver, and then crossed over to the portside machine gun to repeat the whole process again.

"Where are the first-aid kits, Chief?"

"In the bulkhead locker, Herr Oberleutnant." Molders reached above his head, opened the bin and took out a web haversack. Unbuckling the strap, he held it out for Gayer's inspection. "Bandages, shell dressings, sulphur powder, lint, and four ampules of morphine," he said, itemising the contents. "Would you like to see the other kits, sir?"

"No," said Gayer, "that won't be necessary." Anxious to complete his inspection of the airship without further delay, he unclipped the hatch above his head and climbed the ladder leading to the keel.

The chief engineer handed him a flashlight and Gayer trained it ahead of him to illuminate the dark interior of the hull. He walked forward, sweeping the beam every now and then to inspect the gas cells on either side of the

narrow catwalk. Choosing one of the aluminium slip tanks at random, he knelt down, unscrewed the cap, and measured the contents with a dipstick.

"Forty gallons." He glanced over his shoulder at Molders. "All right, Chief," he said, "that's it as far as you're concerned. See you at 1510 hours."

"Yes, sir." Molders turned about and moved aft.

Gayer checked his wristwatch. Twelve hundred. They would be serving lunch in another half hour and the bar would be open in the Mess. He must remember to fill his flask with Schnapps because it was going to be damned cold tonight. He walked on up to the bows and climbed the ladder to the exposed gun platform on top of the envelope. He inspected the three Maxims, then descended to the keel again and climbed on down a second ladder into the control car.

The control car slung beneath the hull was the nerve centre of the airship. Some fifty-eight feet long, the cabin was fully enclosed with good all-round visibility except directly aft where one of the six 240-horsepower Maybach engines was housed. Between the engine compartment and the bridge there was a soundproof radio shack which was permanently manned either by Petty Officer Paulus or his deputy, a senior rating. Forward of this, the elevator wheel, ballast and gas valve controls were positioned in the nose on the portside, while the Zeiss bomb sight, release switches and rudder wheel lay to starboard. The telegraphs, which linked the control car to the midship and rear engine gondolas, hung directly above the chart table which was also on the starboard side of the cabin.

Gayer circled the cabin, examining each window in turn to make sure it had been smeared with anti-freeze. That done, he checked the four oxygen cylinders, and then initialled the deck log, noting as he did so that it was now ten minutes past twelve. Satisfied that he hadn't overlooked anything, Gayer left the flashlight on the chart table, opened the starboard hatch and stepped out on to the forward dais.

Petty Officer Ehrlich was waiting for him at the bottom

of the short flight of steps. He noticed that Ehrlich was sweating, noticed too that his chest was heaving; knowing that the Petty Officer usually went out of his way to avoid any kind of physical exercise, Gayer feared the worst.

"All right, Ehrlich," he said resignedly, "let's hear the bad news."

"It's Petty Officer Ratz, Herr Oberleutnant – he's been placed under arrest."

Gayer sighed. It would be Ratz; the sailmaker had a quick temper and was apt to settle the smallest difference of opinion with his fists. "Who's he been brawling with this time?" he asked.

"Nobody, sir." Ehrlich took a deep breath. "The Kriminalpolizei have accused him of sabotage. They say he was responsible for the destruction of the Zeppelin base at Bremervorde in January."

"What? That's ridiculous. A Court of Inquiry attributed the explosion to an electrical fault in the overhead power cables."

"Maybe so, Herr Oberleutnant, but they've still taken Ratz to the guardroom."

"Have they?" Gayer said angrily. "Well, we'll soon see about that."

He pushed Ehrlich aside and stormed out of the shed. Bloody civilian police; they had no right to interfere, the disaster at Bremervorde was no concern of theirs. Ratz was a key member of the crew and they couldn't do without him. It was his job to keep an eye on the gas cells, patching them in flight should the necessity arise. He would speak to Wenke and get him to take the matter up with Strasser. The Fregattenkapitan would listen to Wenke; at least, Gayer hoped he would.

Police Sergeant Lehr had small, furtive eyes and the sharp-pointed face of a rodent. He was dressed like an undertaker in a dark suit that had gone shiny at the elbows, the detachable collar of his white shirt was decidedly grubby and the cuffs were frayed. There were food stains on the black tie and down the front of his waistcoat and his fingernails were rimmed with dirt. Petty

Officer Gerhold Ratz was undecided whether this was his natural appearance or some sort of disguise.

Lehr said, "All right, Ratz, let's take it from the beginning. Why did you ask Oberleutnant von Gayer for permission to visit the Zeppelin base at Bremervorde on January 10th?"

"Why don't you read the Court of Inquiry proceedings?" Ratz leaned forward, resting both arms on the table, and scowled at the police sergeant seated opposite him. "It could save us both a lot of time and trouble."

"I already have, weeks ago; now I want to hear it from you."

Lehr was playing cat and mouse with him. The game had started three-quarters of an hour ago when the Warrant Officer in charge of the Regulating Office, Lehr, and two naval ratings had stormed into his bunk. "You're under arrest," the Warrant Officer had thundered and had then doubled him off to the guardroom, leaving the police sergeant behind to search his foot locker. Thirty minutes later, the same escort party had collected him from the cells and doubled him over to this cramped little office on the ground floor of the headquarters block.

"I asked you a simple question," Lehr said coldly. "And I'm still waiting for an answer."

"I went to Bremervorde because I had to see my brother-in-law, Walter Hirsch."

"Why?"

"Family reasons." Ratz frowned; the two naval ratings were standing behind him, listening to every word. "My sister," he said, lowering his voice. "She wrote to me complaining that she hadn't heard from Walter in months. She was worried sick and asked if I'd look him up."

"Bit of a ram, is he?"

Ratz nodded. Walter had an eye for the girls all right, and they fancied him too. "Anyway, I showed the Herr Oberleutnant the letter from my sister, Elsa, and he gave me a twelve-hour pass. Then I hitched a lift to Cuxhaven on the ration truck and hung around the supply depot

until the lorry from Bremervorde arrived." It had been a lousy day, sleet and snow falling alternately from a leaden sky. A lousy journey too – fifty miles over cobbled roads in the back of an open lorry. "It was after twelve by the time we reached Bremervorde," Ratz continued. "The driver of the ration truck dropped me off outside the headquarters block and I reported to the Regulating Office. The Warrant Officer in charge told me that I would find Walter in Number 3 shed, working on the L47."

The L47 was berthed alongside the L51. He remembered thinking that the lamp cables dangling from the engine gondolas and control cars on both ships were in very poor condition. In places the insulation had rotted away to expose the bare wires, and you didn't need to have gold braid on your cuffs to know why the cables had not been replaced. Thanks to the British naval blockade, there was a grave shortage of rubber in Germany.

"Then what happened?" Lehr prompted.

"I walked to the far end of the double shed and climbed the ladder which was anchored to the rear engine gondola. Walter was on his hands and knees cleaning one of the Maybachs. He wasn't exactly pleased to see me."

"I bet he wasn't," said Lehr. "Especially as he'd know you've got a hasty temper."

"I didn't pick a fight with him, if that's what you're hinting, although I could guess from Walter's manner that he was shacking up with one of the local tarts. But we were still talking in a friendly way when the L51 suddenly blew up."

The explosion had been no more than a sharp bang, like that of an engine back-firing. For a split second they had stared at one another and then, reacting more swiftly than Walter, he'd scrambled to his feet and reached the window in two strides to see a tongue of flame rising from the port after-engine on the L51. The fire had licked against the envelope and spread rapidly along the hull towards the bows.

"I said something like – Oh, Christ, the bloody ship next door is on fire – and then Walter took off at the speed of light."

Hirsch had pushed him aside, leapt out of the gondola, and landed heavily on the concrete floor some ten feet below. Panic-stricken, he'd followed close on Walter's heels, scrambled down the ladder and started running. Other men had joined him and streamed towards the exit, bumping and boring into one another like a herd of stampeding cattle. Concerned for his own safety, it hadn't bothered him that Walter had sprained an ankle and could barely hobble along. As a sailmaker, he knew that the heat from the fire would expand the hydrogen in the gas cells of the L51, forcing the automatic valves to open. So he'd kept on running until he was clear of the shed and halfway across the field beyond.

"The escaping hydrogen was as lethal as any bomb and the second explosion ripped the shed apart and hurled the roof sixty feet into the air. A second later, the L47 blew up, scattering burning wreckage all over the place. A huge girder crashed through the roof of the adjoining shed and shorted out a power cable to set off a third detonation." Ratz pushed a hand through his tousled hair. "The next time I saw Walter, he was lying on a slab in the morgue."

Although the body had been charred beyond recognition, the mortuary attendant had assured him that it was his brother-in-law; they had compared the teeth with Walter's dental card and found they matched up.

"The Zeppelin base was totally destroyed," Lehr said in a harsh voice.

"Yes."

"That must have pleased your friends in Bismarck Allee."

"What?"

"Number 18, Bismarck Allee in Cuxhaven. Don't tell me you've never heard of that address because I know you've been there often enough."

"What if I have?" Ratz said belligerently. "It's no business of yours what I do when I'm off duty."

"Oh, but it is. Number 18 happens to be a meeting place for the Spartacists."

"I've always been interested in politics." Ratz licked his

lips, nervous now because it had dawned on him that the police had obviously been watching that house for some considerable time and knew what he'd been up to. "I used to be a Social Democrat," he added lamely.

"I know that. The local party officials in your home town of Stettin sent me a very full report about your activities before the war. 'A regular firebrand,' they said, 'always stirring up trouble.' You've a lot in common with Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, those two anarchists; that's why you joined their Spartacist Party." Lehr leaned down and picked up the briefcase propped against the leg of his chair. Slowly, very deliberately, he unfastened both leather straps and took out a number of pamphlets. "I found this seditious anti-war literature in your foot locker."

"They're a load of rubbish," Ratz said in a hoarse voice. "I was going to destroy them."

Lehr smiled and dipped into his briefcase again. "Together with this training manual, I presume?"

The so-called training manual had been run off on a duplicator and contained practical suggestions for hindering the war effort by acts of sabotage. Ratz had never seen it before and, at first, he couldn't think why Lehr should have planted it on him. The only explanation was that somebody up high was determined to reverse the findings of the Court of Inquiry. He thought he knew the reason why too. If the disaster at Bremervorde had been caused by an electrical fault, it meant that every Zeppelin in the fleet was basically unsafe. So it had to be sabotage, and they needed a scapegoat to prove it. Ratz stared at the police sergeant, fear churning his stomach.

Gayer pushed the swing door open and stormed into the headquarters building, his face white with anger. Wenke had let him down badly. He had listened to him very attentively, had agreed that the Kriminalpolizei had no right to arrest Petty Officer Ratz, and had then more or less declined to do anything about it. And why? Because Strausser was leading the diversionary attack on the

Midlands and the Fregattenkapitan had already left for Tondern with the other Zeppelin commanders. The Kapitanleutnant was therefore the senior officer at Nordholtz and since there was no one to whom he could pass the buck, Wenke had refused to stick his neck out. At least, that was how Gayer saw it.

"Find a replacement," Wenke had said, as if there were any number of sailmakers to pick and choose from. Well, Gayer had news for the Herr Kapitanleutnant: Ratz was the best there was and he was damned if they were going to leave him behind.

Gayer walked past the briefing room, then opened the next door on his right. Two naval ratings snapped to attention and a very pale-looking Ratz slowly got to his feet. The police sergeant remained seated at the table.

"They told me in the guardroom that I'd find you here." Gayer crooked a finger at Lehr. "I want a word with you," he said coldly, "outside in the corridor."

Their ensuing conversation was brief and acrimonious. Ordered to release Ratz from police custody, Lehr said he was working for State Security and demanded that the Herr Oberleutnant put the order in writing. Gayer then raised the spectre of his grandfather who, he said, was on extremely friendly terms with Kaiser Wilhelm II, Field Marshal Hindenburg and, more importantly, Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff, the most powerful man in Germany, the man who told the Emperor, the Reichstag and his own Commander-in-Chief what they had to do. A word in the Baron's ear and the police sergeant would rue the day he had crossed swords with Gayer. However, Gayer said that he could appreciate Lehr's predicament and was therefore prepared to compromise. Petty Officer Ratz would be confined in the guardroom until the Zeppelin crew assembled at 1510 hours and would be handed over to Lehr for questioning after the mission was completed. Furthermore, Gayer would withdraw his parachute just in case Ratz took it into his head to bale out while they were over England. Although not sure who was bluffing who, Lehr decided that discretion was the better part of valour.

Thursday, March 22nd, 1917

1330 Hours
to
2215 Hours

5

Lethbridge clasped both hands behind his neck and stared up at the ceiling. He wanted a cigarette, but he'd left the packet of Wills Goldflake in his pants and his clothes were lying in an untidy heap on the chair near the window. To satisfy his craving for a smoke, he would have to get out of bed and he was reluctant to disturb the woman sleeping beside him.

Her name was Charlotte Ingold. She was thirty-one years old, exceedingly attractive, and a war widow. Her husband, Captain Simon Ingold of the East Surreys, had been killed in action at the first battle of Ypres in October 1914, leaving her with two small sons aged nine and eight, both of whom were away at a preparatory boarding school in Hampshire. Although her late husband had left her well provided for, money and a large house on the outskirts of Bordon were no compensation for loneliness and Charlotte had been ripe for an affair when Lethbridge had met her back in September.

Charlotte's house lay within easy walking distance of the training school at Bordon and he was one of several pilots invited to tea on Sunday afternoon. Lethbridge recollected that it had been a very formal affair, everybody sitting around eating crumpets and making polite conversation, but he'd been made to feel he was someone special, the way she had kept smiling at him. He had returned to camp with the other student pilots, then borrowed a bicycle and cycled back to her house, arriving there long after dark. A sudden thought that perhaps he was about to make a fool of himself had vanished the moment he saw the welcoming smile on Charlotte's face when she answered the door to him. He had stayed to supper and afterwards they had gone into the drawing room and made love on the sofa in front of a log fire.

An easy lay, Lethbridge thought, convinced he was merely one of a small army of men who'd bedded Charlotte. But then he'd made a few discreet enquiries and discovered, much to his surprise, that he was totally wrong, that Charlotte Ingold was anything but a camp follower. Lethbridge didn't question why he had been singled out; the attraction was mutual and he had been content to leave it at that.

By every law and canon, their affair should have withered and died when he was posted to Farr's squadron at Saxon's Farm, but it hadn't. Finding he missed Charlotte more than he'd thought possible, Lethbridge had asked her to join him, and she had answered his letter by return of post to say that she would catch the four-thirty afternoon train to St Albans the following day and would he please book a room in a suitable hotel for as long as he thought appropriate. Radlett would have been more convenient since it was less than three miles from the airfield, whereas St Albans was nearer eight, but he could see her point. Radlett was a tiny village with only one hotel; St Albans was a city with a population of 35,000 and it was easier to remain anonymous in a crowd. So here she was, tall, dark and slender; the widow of Captain Simon Ingold now masquerading as Mrs Frank Lethbridge and, for the past three months, residing at the Peacock Hotel on Broad Street.

Charlotte stirred and opened her eyes. "What time is it, Frank?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Five minutes before two." Lethbridge threw the bedclothes aside and swung his feet out on to the floor. "I'm going to get myself a cigarette," he said. "Do you want one?"

"Yes, please." Charlotte stretched both arms above her head and yawned. "When do you have to leave?"

"There's plenty of time yet. Matthew's train doesn't arrive until three twenty-five and Radlett is only a ten-minute drive from here."

Lethbridge had been on the point of leaving for St Albans when Farr had telephoned the squadron to say that he'd been delayed in London, and he had then

volunteered to meet him at the station. His motives had been less than altruistic; not only did it enable him to spend more time with Charlotte but Farr also happened to own a Vauxhall car, an infinitely superior means of transport compared to the heavy GS army bicycle Lethbridge was normally obliged to use.

"Matthew?" Charlotte queried with a smile. "I bet you don't call him that to his face."

"Only when there's no one else around."

"He must be a very tolerant commanding officer to let you get away with it."

"Farr's okay." Lethbridge returned to the bed, handed a lighted cigarette to Charlotte and climbed in beside her. "We get along just fine."

"But what's he like as a person, Frank?"

Lethbridge gave the question some thought. What more could he tell her about his twenty-six-year-old CO? She already knew what he looked like, that he was about five eleven, dark haired and well built. Perhaps the fact that women were attracted to him fascinated her?

"Matthew is very self-possessed and sure of himself," Lethbridge said presently. "I don't think I've ever heard him raise his voice and when he gives an order it sounds more like a suggestion, but I've yet to meet the man who thought he was being invited to take part in a debate. He's a man who inspires confidence and you just know that you can depend on him, that he'll always be there like the Rock of Gibraltar. You'd like him, I'm sure."

"You must introduce me sometime," Charlotte said quietly.

Lethbridge rolled over on to his left side and stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray on the bedside table. Charlotte could forget that idea; he wasn't about to introduce her to Farr or any of the other officers in the squadron. Sure, he was fond of Charlotte, very fond, but he wanted to keep her in the background. He had a feeling that once he invited Charlotte to Saxon's Farm it would be the first step along the road to confetti and rice. Maybe he was becoming over-sensitive, but it seemed to him that lately Charlotte had been hinting that

he should legalise their situation.

"Matthew is a very private person," he said, avoiding the issue. "He keeps himself pretty much to himself, but two things I can tell you about him. I know he has a girl; he never speaks about her but I've seen her photograph in a silver frame on his bedside locker. She's a VAD, about twenty-one, very attractive and definitely out of the top drawer."

"Like me," Charlotte said, laughing uneasily.

"Exactly like you," Lethbridge said and removed the cigarette that was burning down between her fingers.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Frank."

"Is that a fact?" Lethbridge cleared his throat noisily "The other thing about Matthew is that he has this drawing of a Zeppelin pinned to a notice board in his office. The clerks tell me he sketched it himself one day last September. Anyway, it's a finè drawing and every detail is to scale – hull, rudder, elevators, control car, midships and rear engine gondolas. Except for the registration number – L72. That's twice the size it should be and ruins the whole perspective."

"How very odd."

"Yeah." Lethbridge scratched an itch on his cheek. "That Zeppelin really obsesses Matthew. I've often caught him staring at it, a hard look in his eyes, like he wanted to kill every son of a bitch on board her. I have a feeling that the L72 and the girl in the silver frame are the two most important things in his life."

"Don't let's talk about the war, Frank."

"Okay, Charlotte, but what else is there?"

"Let's talk about us."

Alarm bells started ringing in his head and hastily he tried to think of some way he could change the subject without hurting Charlotte.

"Easter is only a few weeks off," she added.

"So?" he said cautiously.

"So both my sons will be coming home."

"I bet they're looking forward to the school holidays." It was the only safe thing he could say.

"What are you going to tell the manager of this hotel? I

mean, how are you going to explain my absence?"

Lethbridge relaxed. For one awful moment he'd thought Charlotte was going to suggest that her sons should join them. "I don't know," he said, "but I'll think of something."

Charlotte was going to leave him, he felt it in his bones. She would pack her bags, walk out of the hotel and never come back. So what? Their affair couldn't last for ever. It had to end sometime, didn't it? Charlotte was a nice woman but his sights had always been set elsewhere, hadn't they? So why the sense of impending loss when, every week, regular as clockwork, he submitted an application requesting transfer to the Western Front? Except perhaps that deep down he knew he was counting on Farr to consign every application to the wastepaper basket.

"A penny for them," Charlotte murmured.

"What?"

"Your thoughts."

A penny? Was that all they were worth? Maybe he should ask Freud to make a bid for them? "I was wondering if I'll ever see you again," he said, voicing a newly discovered fear.

"I dare say you'll still be in the land of the living when I return." Charlotte rolled over on to her stomach, then raised herself up on both elbows and leaned over him. "After all, the boys only get a fortnight at Easter."

Her mouth was very close, very moist and very inviting. So he kissed her and gently explored a breast, circling the nipple with a finger until it became erect.

"I don't think you should do that," she murmured huskily.

"Why not?"

"Because it's getting late and you've a train to meet."

Lethbridge glanced at his wristwatch. "It's still only two-thirty," he said pointedly.

"Oh. Well, that's different then," Charlotte said softly.

Gayer was a poor correspondent and a lazy one. Approximately twice a month he managed to write a duty letter to

his parents that was notable for its brevity and lack of content. Inspiration evaporated the instant he opened his writing case. Faced with a blank sheet of paper and the restrictions imposed by the censor, Gayer invariably enquired after his parents' health, informed them that he was well and happy and then filled out the rest of the page with a bulletin on the kind of weather they'd been having at Nordholtz.

Although on this occasion Gayer did have some news to write home about, he was still unwilling to put pen to paper. For one thing, he was reluctant to tell his mother just how many days' furlough he had coming to him. And for another, he was loth to tempt providence. In too many cases he knew of, letters that had been written immediately before taking off on an operational mission had been sent on to the next-of-kin with the personal effects of the deceased. All the same, he ought to warn his mother that he would be coming home on Thursday. How about using the telephone? Gayer mulled it over; the line to Breslau was usually atrocious but it would solve a lot of problems. All right then, provided he returned from the raid in one piece, he would hitch a ride into Cuxhaven tomorrow afternoon and phone her from the central post office.

Ten days' leave: well, that was something to look forward to, but he would need to plan it very carefully. His last furlough had been a disaster and Gayer was damned if he was going to spend the whole of this one in that dreary *Schloss* they called home, stuck out in the middle of a pine forest ten miles from Breslau. Nor was he going to allow his mother to play matchmaker again and organise a whirl of social activities where he was confronted with a host of eligible young women, all of whom were exceedingly dull and virtuous. Then there was his father who was bitterly preoccupied with a war he was unable to take part in because he was paralysed from the waist down, the result of a riding accident that had happened six years ago. A little of his company went a very long way these days.

No, this time round, he was going to spend the greater

part of his furlough in Berlin and he wouldn't be staying at his grandfather's residence on the Unter den Linden either. He had somewhere else in mind, a certain red-brick apartment house in the unfashionable Pommersche Strasse, where there was a very obliging widow whose husband had been run through with a lance at Tannenberg.

Her name was Frau Irmgard Todt, a petite, twenty-eight-year-old brunette with hazel eyes and a demure manner that belied her performance in bed. Gayer knew of at least one other Admiralty staff officer who had found solace with Irmgard following her sudden bereavement in the August of 1914 before Sauckle had arranged for him to meet her. Sauckle had thought it the gentlemanly thing to do when he received orders to join the Battlecruiser *Seydlitz* because she had been his mistress since the early spring of 1915 and he'd felt that someone ought to look after her in his absence. Apart from the fact that they had worked together in the same branch of the Admiralty, Gayer still didn't know why he had been so honoured. Nevertheless, he was, and always would be grateful to the unfortunate Sauckle who, barely four months after the introduction, had been killed at Jutland.

Gayer had declined to follow Sauckle's example and pass Irmgard on to a friend when he transferred to the Naval Airship Division. So far as he was concerned, Irmgard fulfilled a basic need and he continued to pay the rent on her apartment and had even made her a small allowance. He had seen her only once in the last nine months and then just for an hour or so between train connections on the way back to Nordholtz from Breslau. The memory of that hot, sultry afternoon in August and the pleasing things she had done to him lingered still, and it was the main reason why he was reluctant to disclose how many days' furlough he'd been granted.

But why should he resort to subterfuge in order to spend a few days with Irmgard? He was twenty-six years old, for Christ's sake, and surely free to come and go as he pleased. When he telephoned tomorrow, he would

simply tell his parents that he would be staying from Thursday to Sunday and leave it at that – no excuses, no explanations.

Gayer checked his wristwatch. Fifteen hundred; time he was leaving. Molders and the rest of the crew would be assembling outside the Normann shed to await his inspection. Police Sergeant Lehr would be there too, anxious to make sure that Petty Officer Ratz embarked with the others.

A flask of Schnapps, iron rations, gloves, bridge coat and silk scarf; satisfied that he had everything he needed, Gayer left his room and walked out of the officers' mess. Although it was an unusually warm and sunny day for mid-March, he felt cold and empty inside.

6

As Kapitanleutnant Wenke entered the Normann shed, a loud, harsh voice called the assembled ground crew to attention. Acutely conscious that most of the naval ratings towered above him, Wenke acknowledged the compliment with a brief salute; then, climbing the dais, he opened the hatch and stepped into the control car to be greeted with yet more salutes, this time from Koch and Gayer.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said informally. "I assume we're ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Herr Kapitan." Gayer stared at him, a tight-lipped expression on his face. "Every member of the crew is present and accounted for."

Wenke moved to the chart table and checked the entries in the deck log. Gayer was still sulking then, still holding it against him that he'd refused to intervene in the Ratz affair. The Petty Officer was on board, though;

Gayer had made that abundantly clear by the emphasis he'd placed on the word 'every'.

"I've already recorded the gas and air temperatures," Gayer said tersely.

"Yes, so I see, Friedrich." Wenke frowned. Why the hell was he being so mealy-mouthed towards his Executive Officer? He wasn't required to account for his actions to a mere Oberleutnant. Furthermore, if Gayer had used his brains, he would have realised that Sergeant Lehr would never have arrested Ratz unless he had authority to do so from Fregattenkapitan Strasser. It was time he deflated Gayer's ego and put him in his place. He straightened up and turned about. "Tell me something, Herr Oberleutnant," he said in an icy voice. "Have you also remembered to have the ship weighed off? Or am I expecting too much of you?"

A crude rebuke, childish too perhaps, but effective for all that. He was conscious that the 'von Gayers' of this world would have established their authority with a haughty stare, but he was strictly bourgeoisie, not a Junker. The Junkers needed him though; for all their fine airs and graces, they couldn't wage their war without men like him to fight it. Wenke moved forward into the nose and stood between the two petty officers, Ehrlich on his left, manning the elevator wheel, and Fiesler, the helmsman, on his right.

"Permission to carry on, Herr Kapitan?" Gayer's voice was subdued now, almost apologetic.

Wenke nodded briefly. The ground crew were in position, dressed off in single file from bows to stern on the port and starboard sides of the Zeppelin, each man ready to haul on a drag line. With the ship weighed off and balanced in a state of neutral buoyancy, like a toy balloon, two men could lift the Zeppelin off the supporting trestles, but a whole army was required to march her out of the shed.

In those final minutes before take-off, the L72 always reminded Wenke of a mammoth centipede. A centipede? He scowled; the way things were going, in a few months from now he would see his ship as a dinosaur, the pride of

the Zeppelin fleet made extinct by those three squadrons of Gothas forming at Ghent.

"A dinosaur," he repeated aloud.

"Sir?" Gayer asked, puzzled.

Wenke hastily glanced left and right. The Zeppelin was still only half in, half out of the Normann shed. "A dinosaur could move faster," he said cryptically.

"Yes, sir."

Gayer evidently thought he'd taken leave of his senses, but he hadn't. The Gothas had made the Zeppelin obsolete but Strasser would never see that. The Fregattenkapitan would continue to defend the Naval Airship Division, using the same old arguments. "It is not on the direct material damage that the value of airship attacks should be measured, but rather on the general result of our onslaught upon England's insularity, otherwise undisturbed by the war. The dislocation of transport, the dread of the Zeppelin prevailing in a wide strata of society and, above all, the fact that we are tying down twelve Royal Flying Squadrons and 17,000 artillery officers and men who could be used elsewhere, is reason enough to continue with our present policy." Brave words, Wenke thought, but even so, the writing was there on the wall. The Gothas could do their job more efficiently by day and by night.

"I think the ground crew must have heard you, sir," Gayer said and smiled nervously.

Wenke looked up and saw that the Petty Officer in charge had raised both arms high above his head to signal they were ready to release the drag ropes. "So it would seem, Friedrich. Now let's see how quickly they can move out of the way."

"Right." Gayer glanced to his left and caught Ehrlich's eye. "Lighten ship," he ordered.

Ehrlich took one hand off the wheel, reached for the toggle and gave it a sharp tug. A cascade of water poured from the breeches in the bow and stern, drenching most of the ground crew before they had time to get clear.

The Zeppelin soared upwards, the barracks and sheds rapidly becoming Lilliputian in scale. Gayer could see the

surf breaking on the shore in the far distance and, beyond the gorse-covered sand dunes, a pall of black smoke from a chimneystack in Cuxhaven rose lazily into the still air. In the immediate foreground, a train was standing at a wayside halt on the line to Bremerhaven. At 400 feet he told Ehrlich to level off, then rang the telegraph. Moments later, the six Maybach engines thundered into life and the airship slowly gained momentum.

"What's our air speed?" Wenke asked presently.

"Five knots," said Gayer.

"Good. You'd better hold it at that while we circle the base." Wenke moved to the starboard side of the cabin and raised his binoculars. The L36 had just taken off and the ground crew were manoeuvring the L39 into position. He couldn't see the south-west corner of the field, but he thought it likely that the L54 was still inside the Axel shed. "What time are we due to rendezvous with the Alhorn group?"

"1610 hours," said Gayer.

"That's what I thought." Wenke lowered his binoculars. The rendezvous point off Borkum Island was a good twenty-five miles from Nordholtz, their maximum speed was exactly fifty-one point two knots and the time was now 1530 hours. Computing the figures in his head, Wenke calculated they had roughly nine minutes to play with. "Any sign of the L54 yet?" he asked.

"They're moving her out of the Axel shed now."

Wenke allowed himself a fleeting smile. What was it Strasser had said to him before the briefing? – "This raid has got to be a success, Carl." Well, they still had a long way to go yet, but at least the Nordholtz group would reach the rendezvous point on time.

Farr shared a first-class compartment on the slow train to Radlett with three other passengers: a prim, middle-aged spinster, a florid-faced businessman and an incredibly young-looking second lieutenant in the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment. The junior subaltern was too much in awe of field officers to strike up a conversation with Farr; the spinster obviously distrusted men of

any age, size, shape or kind and kept her nose buried in a book; and the businessman, three sheets to the wind after an alcoholic lunch, fell asleep minutes after boarding the train. But Farr was unaware of the long silence; he passed the entire journey thinking about Laura.

They had an insuperable problem. He wanted to marry her but now she was only prepared to offer friendship. There was no one else of course, there never would be; she had made that very clear without him asking. He could understand why Laura should mistake love for sympathy, affection for pity; she had received too much of both from family, friends and relations in the weeks she'd spent recuperating from the emergency operation. The surgeons had given Laura a tin foot, but the protective suit of armour was something she had acquired all by herself.

He should never have agreed to wait that year, and the irony of it was that Laura had been dead against the idea. Barely twenty-one, that's far too young, her father had said, conveniently ignoring the fact that many of the débutantes presented at court with Laura in 1913 had since married. Then Sir Henry had reminded him that he was returning to the Front, which Farr had thought was another way of saying that he could be dead within a matter of weeks, and Sir Henry didn't want to see his daughter a grief-stricken young widow. All quiet on the Western Front meant that on average a thousand men had been killed or wounded in a week; those were the bald statistics behind the official communiqués which spoke of patrol activity and some harassing fire from German batteries. Although Farr had no idea how many Royal Flying Corps personnel were included in those figures, he'd seen the force of Sir Henry's argument and had accepted it.

Maybe Laura felt that his commitment to her had never been completely whole-hearted, that if he'd really loved her he would have ignored her father's objections. Farr scowled at his reflection in the carriage window; there was no maybe about it, he had hit the nail on the head. Why else would Laura adroitly change the subject when-

ever he tried to tell her just how much she meant to him? She evidently thought he had a guilty conscience, that he felt sorry for her because she'd lost a foot. So perhaps it was unsightly and she would never be able to completely hide the deformity even under the longest of skirts, but he loved her for what she was and it didn't matter a damn to him that she no longer had a pair of neat ankles.

The train drew into the station and slowly ground to a halt. Somewhere down the platform from his first-class compartment, a porter called out, "Radlett, this is Radlett." Farr got out, slammed the door behind him and walked towards the exit.

Lethbridge was waiting for him in the entrance hall. There was a contented expression on his face which suggested that either he'd enjoyed a very good lunch or else he'd spent an agreeable hour or so in bed with a woman. Probably both, Farr decided on reflection.

"How did you make out at the conference?" Lethbridge asked, then touched his cap, a gesture that had more in common with a cheery wave than a formal salute.

"We're getting a replacement for Hyatt plus a reconditioned airplane. But I expect you already know that, Frank."

"Yeah. We received a signal from Air Defence Headquarters shortly after you left for London."

."What's he like?" Farr asked.

"Who?"

"Lieutenant Moorhouse. Don't tell me he hasn't arrived yet?"

"We're expecting him any time now. Could be you'll find him waiting for you when we get back to camp." Lethbridge stopped by the Vauxhall sports car parked in the yard outside the station. "Do you want to drive?" he asked, anxious to change the subject.

"No, I'm happy for you to do the chauffeuring."

"Okay, you're the boss," said Lethbridge.

Farr got into the passenger seat. The top was down and the leather upholstery was hot. The Vauxhall had obviously been standing in the sun for a considerable number of hours.

"Must be all of seventy today." Farr looked up at the clear blue sky. "Most unusual for March."

"You can say that again." Lethbridge swung the starting handle, cranked the engine into life and then got in behind the wheel. "Still, knowing the climate in this country, you can bet it won't last."

"You're probably right." Farr lit a cigarette and leaned back. "What's our availability state?"

Lethbridge shifted into gear and let the clutch in. That was one hell of a sneaky question and there were no prizes for guessing that Farr knew he couldn't answer it. "Maybe you should ask Broadhurst? He's in charge of the squadron while you're away. I'd hate to give you a bum steer."

"You've missed your vocation, Frank. You'd make a good politician, the way you side-step questions so neatly."

Lethbridge chuckled. "I'm a lawyer, don't forget."

"A lawyer and a politician." Farr tossed his cigarette over the side. "I doubt if the War Office will listen to Sewell but I bet you could wear them down. Christ, they'd agree to anything just to get rid of you."

"You mean Sewell actually said he'd back your plan?" Lethbridge shook his head in disbelief.

"Why wouldn't he?" Farr said, unperturbed. "It might be a novel way to bomb Nordholtz but it's perfectly feasible. I've already proved that."

Lethbridge wondered if he had. Farr had certainly demonstrated that it was possible to get a BE into the air inside a distance of sixty feet. Whether he could do the same thing from a barge in the middle of the North Sea was another matter. There was also the small problem of landing on a floating platform which would probably be rolling from side to side as well as up and down.

"Have you figured out a way to land on this sixty-foot barge yet?" he asked, voicing his doubts.

"I plan to ditch in the sea alongside one of the destroyers," Farr said calmly.

"Just like that?"

"Well, obviously we'll need at least one full dress rehearsal after the Navy has had time to work up their

recovery drill. I don't imagine our planes will stay afloat all that long."

"No, I don't suppose they will." Lethbridge turned into Saxon's Farm, drove past the double line of bell tents and then pulled up outside the small marquee that served as the squadron office. "About this full dress rehearsal," he said slowly. "I'd just as soon give it a miss and hope that everything goes off okay on the day."

"I'll bear that in mind," Farr said as he got out of the car. "Meantime, suppose you park the Vauxhall by the repair shop."

George Broadhurst, the burly Yorkshireman commanding 'A' Flight, was waiting for him in the office. A former bank cashier from Leeds, Broadhurst looked as though he'd just discovered that five pounds was missing from his till.

Farr eyed the millboard the Yorkshireman was holding and surmised their aircraft availability state wasn't too hot. "Don't tell me," he said wearily. "Half the bloody squadron is grounded. Right, George?"

"It's not as bad as that." Broadhurst frowned at his millboard. "Allchurch's machine is still unserviceable. The fitters repaired his undercart but now the engine's acting up – the revs keep falling off for some reason."

"I'd say that was good news." Farr smiled philosophically. "It means Allchurch will be denied the opportunity tonight to write it off for good and all."

Broadhurst nodded, then ploughed doggedly on. "Sergeant Newton's observer is off sick; he twisted his knee playing football. I suppose Allchurch could always take his place?"

"Why not?" said Farr. "If he handles a machine gun the way he flies an FE, it should be a very interesting night."

"That gives us six planes then. How many patrols have we got to find?"

"Four," said Farr. "Each patrol is to consist of two aircraft. I'll fly an extra sortie to make up the number."

"Moorhouse hasn't arrived yet, so you may need another pilot to fly an extra sortie."

Farr said, "I don't have to think about that until just

before the briefing at 1730 hours."

"Right." Broadhurst tucked the millboard under his arm. "We've had another complaint from the Shiltons. They claim some of their eggs have been disappearing into the men's cookhouse. I think they could be right."

Farr reckoned the tenants of Saxon's Farm had a lot to put up with. They worked long hours, the war had deprived them of one of their most productive fields, and the two girls from the Women's Land Army who'd replaced their farm labourers were forever being pestered by the soldiers. The low-flying aircraft disturbed the livestock and despite a host of assurances from him, gates were continually being left open so that a lot of time and effort was wasted in rounding up stray cattle. In a rash moment, the Shiltons had allowed the officers to use their front parlour, a gesture which Farr thought they probably now regretted, especially as Broadhurst, in his capacity as Mess Secretary, had installed a waiter and the cook enjoyed the run of their kitchen.

"How many eggs were stolen?"

"A couple of dozen," said Broadhurst, "give or take a few."

"You'd better reimburse the Shiltons from the ration cash allowance. Then, starting tomorrow, we'll mount a twenty-four-hour guard on that bloody hen-house until further notice. That should make our thief a popular man." Rough justice, but it was a rough old world.

The distant throb of a ninety-horsepower engine captured his attention and he instinctively cocked his head on one side to listen intently.

"That must be Moorhouse," Broadhurst said.

"Yes."

Farr walked outside and looked up, shielding his eyes against the glare. The single-seater was about two miles off, a large black insect in the sky flying straight and level at an altitude of five hundred feet. The BE drew nearer, Moorhouse steadily losing height as he closed on Saxon's Farm. An experienced pilot, he circled the field once, taking a good look at the lie of the land before he made his final approach. Then, throttling back, he dropped in

over the far hedgerow and set the plane down.

"He's good," Broadhurst said admiringly.

"I think he'd make a fine instructor," Farr said tersely.

"Shall I tell Moorhouse you'd like to see him in the office?"

"Yes, George, you do that."

Farr returned to the marquee and sat down behind the trestle table he used as a desk. Four patrols equalled eight sorties from seven aircraft; he took a sheet of foolscap from the wad in the pending tray and began to work out a permutation to meet the requirement. Broadhurst and Segeant Newton, Lethbridge and himself, Yarborough and Sergeant Collins, and finally, Moorhouse and himself again. That would give the ground crew plenty of time to refuel his plane and Moorhouse could grab a few hours' rest before he went out on patrol.

Farr looked up from his notes and stared at the drawing on the notice board, a smile that was almost a snarl forming on his lips. Only one man on board the L72 had tripped the switch to release a 660-pound bomb on Clerkenwell but he would never have reached the target had it not been for the rest of the crew. Commander, navigator, helmsman, elevator, wireless operator, air gunners and twelve motor mechanics plus a number of reliefs for the key personnel in the control car. By his reckoning there had to be at least twenty-six men on that Zeppelin, all of whom were collectively responsible for what had happened that night in September.

"Major Farr?" A tall, lanky figure ducked under the tent flap and saluted. "My name's Moorhouse – Alan Moorhouse."

"Welcome to Saxon's Farm." Farr stood up and shook hands. "Take a seat," he said, pointing to the collapsible chairs stacked one on top of the other in the far corner of the tent.

"Thank you, sir."

Moorhouse collected a chair from the pile, unfolded it and sat down. Unbuttoning his leather coat, he removed the silk scarf around his neck. Two livid indentations on either side of his throat showed where a machine-gun

bullet had entered and exited, a souvenir of his dog fight with Lieutenant Max Immelman, the German ace fighter pilot.

"That was a nice landing." Farr smiled. "Did you have a good flight?"

"It had its exciting moments."

Moorhouse spoke slowly and deliberately, a practice which Farr surmised he'd adopted in order to disguise his stutter.

"You may have a few more tonight, Alan," he said.

"Oh." Moorhouse swallowed. "I was hoping I might catch a train back to Bordon this evening to collect my kit." He smiled nervously and patted the pockets of his leather coat. "All I've got with me is a clean pair of socks, a face towel and my washbag. There was no room for anything else."

"We're expecting visitors," Farr said evenly, "and you're on the reception committee."

Moorhouse was slow to comprehend but finally the penny dropped and his jaw worked as he struggled to control the words. "Which p-plane will I be using?" he asked in a voice that barely rose above a whisper.

"The one you arrived in."

Moorhouse hesitated. "It needs looking at," he said. "The wings have a tendency to warp."

"They're supposed to," said Farr.

"I'm aware of that, sir, but they're flapping about like two flags in a stiff breeze. The engine's not too good either. It cut out on me twice."

Farr stared at him, wondering how Moorhouse would have fared had he been posted to a squadron on the Western Front. How long would it have been before this tall, slim young man with his neat black moustache ended up tied to a post, a gas mask upside down on his face and a white aiming mark pinned over his heart? A month? Two months?

"You're a lucky bastard," he said aloud.

"Sir?"

"I said you're a lucky bastard. What's more, I'm going to prove it."

Farr got to his feet and strode out of the marquee. Two airmen were about to refuel Moorhouse's BE but he told them to leave it because there was enough juice in the tank for what he had in mind. He climbed into the cockpit and strapped himself in; one of the mechanics swung the prop and when the engine caught, he taxied up to the far end of the field and turned down wind. Then, opening the throttle, he roared past the double line of bell tents and took off.

For the next ten minutes, Farr threw the plane about, performing every aerobatic feat in the manual and a lot more that weren't. He dived, soared, twisted and looped. Finally, he went into a deliberate spin and came out again with the wings still intact and the engine running sweetly.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with the BE. He knew it and so did Moorhouse.

7

Wenke moved to the starboard side of the control car, rubbed the frozen condensation from the window and stared into the darkness. Although both sides of the glass had been smeared with alcohol, the sub-zero temperatures at 19,000 feet had turned the liquid to a muddy brown. Visibility was almost nil, but he hadn't really expected to see the other ships. In the early days of the war, most commanding officers had left their navigation lights on long after they had crossed the English coast, but this dangerous practice had ceased in 1915. It was an obvious enough precaution and one that he'd adopted long before Strasser had made it a standing order.

Wenke moved a pace nearer the chart table and looked over the navigator's shoulder. "What's our latest position, August?" he asked quietly.

Koch raised a hand to shield a faint smile and pretended to study the chart. It was all Herr Leutnant this and Herr Leutnant that and yes sir, no sir, three bags full when they were on the ground, but once they were airborne, Wenke relaxed and became a different man. The sudden transformation never ceased to amaze him.

"I calculate that we're here." Koch pointed to a faint cross he'd marked on the chart a few minutes earlier. "That's about forty miles north-north-east of Cromer."

"I see."

"Of course that's merely dead reckoning. I'll be able to give you a completely accurate position when Paulus asks for a directional fix at 2010 hours."

Wenke frowned. Radio navigational aids were all very well but calling the direction-finding stations at Nordholtz and Borkum was a risky business. Those two shore establishments were not the only people who could pinpoint their position. The British were known to monitor the Zeppelin wavelengths and only a fool would assume they were incapable of cracking the coded messages.

"I wouldn't be surprised to find that we've wandered off course." Koch pushed a lock of brown hair out of his eyes. "The magnetic compass is not exactly reliable at this altitude."

The understatement of the year, Wenke thought. The liquid in the compass was frozen solid. "I presume you've told Petty Officer Paulus to make a note of every directional fix transmitted by the shore stations?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Plot our position first, August, then the other six Zeppelins in the group. It will be interesting to see just how many of our sheep have gone astray."

"Decoding the various messages may take some time," Koch warned.

"Friedrich can lend you a hand. That should speed things up a bit."

Koch's face suddenly became a hazy blur. Black spots danced in front of Wenke's eyes and he rocked back on his heels. Overcome by giddiness, he realised that the altitude was affecting him and groped for the valve on the

cylinder of compressed oxygen which was lashed to the chart table.

"Are you all right, sir?" an anxious voice asked from what seemed a long way off.

"I'm feeling a little faint, that's all."

His speech was slurred as though he'd had too much to drink. Somebody pressed the face mask over his mouth and nose and opened the valve. A few whiffs, Wenke told himself, just a few whiffs, that's all you need. The haze began to lift and then Koch's upturned face came sharply back into focus.

"That's better, August, much better." Wenke draped the mask over the cylinder. "The oxygen smelt a little peculiar though."

"I expect it's contaminated with glycerin," said Koch. "It usually is."

"Quite."

"Would you like a drink, sir?" Gayer offered him a silver hip flask. "You still look rather pale to me."

"No, thank you." Wenke smiled. "It's kind of you to offer, but I'm all right now." He was cold, frozen to the bone, and the Schnapps would have warmed his blood, but he wasn't prepared to risk it. Alcohol mixed with oxygen was a dangerous combination and he needed to keep his wits about him. "Don't let me stop you, Friedrich," he added.

"I think I'll save it until I really feel the cold."

Wenke thought his executive officer was a very lucky man. The rarefied atmosphere appeared to have little effect on him. He couldn't remember Gayer ever complaining that he had a blinding headache or that he was feeling tired and listless. Perhaps they managed to hide it but it seemed to Wenke that Koch, Ehrlich, Fiesler and the rest of the cabin crew shared Gayer's immunity.

"We shall be getting a directional fix from Nordholtz and Borkum shortly, Friedrich."

"Yes, sir."

"So will the other Zeppelins in our group," Wenke continued. "That's why I want you to help August with the decoding."

Gayer lifted the sleeve of his bridge coat and glanced at his wristwatch. "1945 hours," he murmured.

"Yes," said Wenke, "it's going to be a long cold night."

Petty Officer Jacob Paulus was not affected by the cold, nor was his relief, Leading Telegraphist Hans Jurgens, who lay curled up on the floor at his feet fast asleep. Apart from the fact that the soundproof radio shack retained their combined body heat, the 260-horsepower Maybach engine behind the rear partition ensured the temperature rarely fell below sixteen degrees centigrade.

Paulus was twenty-three years old and hailed from Münster. A former high school student, he boasted that he had been offered a place at the local university to read mathematics but had turned it down, a claim that had no foundation whatsoever. Nevertheless, Paulus was regarded as something of an intellectual by the rest of the crew, a flattering image which he went out of his way to sustain. Other men got drunk in the canteen, played cards, gambled their pay away or visited the local whorehouse in Cuxhaven when they were off duty, but not Paulus. He borrowed textbooks on pure and applied mathematics from the library and pretended to study them avidly. He was, however, genuinely interested in chess, a game which helped to stretch his mind and made the time pass more quickly when he was on watch in the radio shack.

Both the miniature chessboard made of leather and the book entitled *Checkmate* were birthday presents from his father. The first ten problems had been easy to solve but tonight he had picked a really difficult one and, try as he might, Paulus failed to see how White could possibly mate in three. Of course, he was labouring under a number of handicaps; the static in the headphones disturbed his concentration, the light from the fifty-watt bulb was extremely poor, and with the minute hand on his watch creeping towards 2010, he was certainly pressed for time. Reluctantly conceding defeat, he turned to the back of the book and looked up the answer.

"Idiot," Paulus said aloud, "stupid, bloody idiot."

Then, still angry that he'd failed to solve the problem for himself, he kicked Jurgens in the ribs.

Jurgens grunted once and slowly opened his eyes. "My turn already?" he asked, yawning.

"I'm about to ask for a directional fix," Paulus told him irritably.

"Lost again are we?"

"With a ready wit like yours," said Paulus, "you should have been a comedian." Turning his back on Jurgens, he rapped out their call sign on the Morse key.

The response was swift, Borkum and Nordholtz acknowledging the brief transmission within seconds. Observing the correct procedure, Paulus asked for a fix and then sent a long tuning call to enable both shore stations to obtain a radio bearing on the L72. That done, he signed off and waited for their reply.

Borkum came back at him sooner than he expected and he barely had time to grab a message pad before the operator began to transmit the bearing in code. As if eager to show just how good he was, the telegraphist at Nordholtz chipped in moments after Borkum had keyed the final group of letters. Writing swiftly, Paulus recorded the signal in what he hoped was a legible hand and ripped the top sheet from the message pad.

"Here," he said, passing the flimsy over his shoulder to Jurgens, "take this to Leutnant Koch."

"Right."

"And be sharp about it. This is only the first of many."

The headphones crackled again and above the static, Paulus recognised the call sign allotted to the L54. Moments later he intercepted an acknowledgment from Borkum.

Koch reached for the slip of paper on which Gayer had decoded the radio bearings and, with the aid of a protractor, carefully plotted them on the squared chart. Conscious that Wenke was hovering in the background, he laid the protractor aside and picked up a ruler. Then, aligning the first bearing with Borkum, he drew a straight line to connect the two points. He repeated the process

with the bearing they'd obtained from Nordholtz, extending the pencil line until it intersected with the first, fifty-three miles north-north-west of Amsterdam.

"That can't be right," Gayer said in a low voice. "I mean, according to your dead reckoning we should be sixteen miles north-east of Yarmouth."

Koch rubbed his eyes. The altitude had finally got to him. Apart from a severe headache, he felt sick and lethargic. Perhaps Gayer was right, perhaps he had made an error? He rubbed out the pencil lines and started again, only to arrive at the same answer.

"That's our exact position, Friedrich, like it or lump it," he said presently.

"There's got to be an error."

"Perhaps you decoded the bearings incorrectly?"

"No." Gayer shook his head. "No, I checked and double-checked each group of letters. That's why I'm so behindhand with the other signals I've received from Jurgens."

"Do we have a problem?" Wenke frowned. The question was irrelevant; the problem was there in front of his eyes, visible on the chart in the shape of a pencilled cross. "Yes, I can see we have," he said quietly.

Wenke examined the deck log. An entry at 1845 hours showed that the prevailing wind at 19,000 feet was then west-south-west, strength fifteen to twenty knots. This was at variance with the forecast they'd received from Nordholtz but that was hardly surprising considering the meteorologists lacked the necessary means to predict the weather above 10,000 feet with any degree of accuracy. The prevailing wind was not the only reason they had drifted off course. There had been other contributory factors: zero visibility because of ice on the windows and the Maybach engines whose performance in the rarefied atmosphere fell short of the Admiralty's specifications. But the primary cause was a compass which functioned sluggishly at high altitude and did not give an accurate magnetic bearing.

Koch said, "We're supposed to cross the English coast at Southwold, twelve miles south of Lowestoft. To do

that, we need to steer two seven eight degrees, sir."

"I don't want to make a decision until I know where the other Zeppelins are."

"Yes, sir." Koch glanced at Gayer. "Have we had all the signals yet?" he asked.

"There's still one to come." Gayer handed him a slip of paper. "These bearings relate to the L54, L39 and L36. I haven't decoded the other two yet."

Koch looked at the first set of bearings, reached for his protractor and plotted them on the chart. He ruled a line, then another, checked the intersection, and satisfied that it was correct, moved on to the next set of figures. He told himself that accuracy was more important than speed but found it difficult to observe that axiom with Wenke breathing down his neck. The pace was unrelenting; no sooner had he completed the Nordholtz group than Gayer passed him another set of bearings. He heard Jurgens murmur something to the executive officer and guessed the telegraphist had just delivered the last signal from the Alhorn force, a supposition that was confirmed when a further set of figures appeared in front of him minutes later.

"Don't bother to transfer those bearings," Wenke said, peering over his shoulder. "It's already clear that the group is scattered to the four winds."

"Yes, sir." Koch drew a circle around the six intersections he'd marked on the chart. "God knows what's happened to the diversionary force from Tondern and Wittmundhaven, but our little lot is well and truly dispersed over an area of six hundred square miles. The L54 is the only Zeppelin within striking distance of Southwold."

Wenke said, "We can forget Southwold. It will take all night to get this group in tight formation. We'll change course, make for the Thames estuary and head up river." He turned to Gayer. "Signal the group; tell them they are to proceed independently to the target."

"Yes, sir."

"Then take us down to 12,000." A sour smile appeared on Wenke's face. "If we lose some of the ice we're carry-

ing, we may get a true bearing from the compass just for a change."

Petty Officer Gerhold Ratz moved slowly aft along the keel, beaming his flashlight at the gas cells on either side of the catwalk. Surrounded by a web of girders and bracing wires which towered above him, he was not unlike a bird trapped inside a vast aviary. The illusion was strengthened by six hammocks slung between the vertical struts like so many perches. He turned about and trained the powerful flashlight on the recumbent figures occupying three hammocks in the bows. Although the top platform gunners were fully dressed and buried under several layers of blankets, the cold and the noise from the Maybach engines were such that Ratz couldn't understand how they managed to sleep through it all.

A faint thud on the catwalk behind him raised his hackles and he whirled round, thoroughly alarmed. The beam picked out a squat, gorilla-like figure ambling towards him, his legs bowed, his arms almost reaching to his knees. Dollmann, Ratz thought, Machinist-mate bloody Dollmann, the bane of Molders' life, and his too.

"Real brass monkey weather, isn't it?" Dollmann shouted cheerfully. "I tell you, my knackers are frozen solid."

Dollmann had a coarse sense of humour, a foul mouth and a lewd, one-track mind; three solid reasons why Ratz detested him. "It is pretty cold," Ratz agreed.

"Pretty cold?" Dollmann drew close, so close that Ratz could smell garlic on his breath. "Christ, I'd give a fortune to be on watch right this minute."

"What are you complaining about? An hour from now, you'll be warming yourself over a 260-horsepower engine; an hour from now, I'll still be walking the catwalk."

"Well, you're a sailmaker," Dollmann said with undeniable logic. "I'm a mechanic and some of us have it worse than others."

It was the preamble to a familiar beef, one that Ratz could recite word for word. The off-duty men in the

control car and the midships gondolas could doss down by their Maybach engines, but it was Dollmann's misfortune to be in the rear engine gondola with Molders, and Molders ran a tight compartment. Nobody was allowed to sleep on the floor of his gondola.

"Still, thirty-six hours from now I'll be shot of Molders for ten days." Dollmann eyed him speculatively. "They letting you go on furlough, Gerhold?" he asked.

Ratz ignored the question. Police Sergeant Lehr would be waiting for him when they returned to base and he didn't want to think about tomorrow or what the future might hold.

"I wrote my girl and told her to meet me at Dortmund station seven twenty-five sharp on Thursday night. We'll have dinner, drink a lot of wine and then go home to bed. And you know something?" Dollmann leered. "That's where we'll stay for the next ten days."

"Lucky you," Ratz said tonelessly. He wished Dollmann would shut up and let him get on with his job. It was the only thing that kept his mind completely occupied.

"You got a girl waiting for you in Stettin, Gerhold?"

"No." Ratz moved forward, forcing the other man to back off.

"You don't know what you're missing." Dollmann reached inside his seaman's jacket and brought out a battered-looking wallet. Still backing off slowly, he extracted three snapshots and held them out for Ratz to see. "Bet you wish you had someone like her back home?"

The girl was dark and plump, wearing only ankle boots and silk stockings with lacy garters. The snapshots showed her reclining on a chaise-longue cupping her breasts, standing legs apart hands on hips, and perched on the arm of the sofa, one hand touching her pubic hair.

"That's not your girl, is it?" Ratz asked incredulously.

"No. I got them in Cuxhaven. They remind me of her though." Dollmann was still leering, still holding the pornographic snapshots to the flashlight, when there was a sudden vicious drumming noise behind him that sounded like machine-gun fire. "Jesus Christ, we're being attacked."

Ratz shoved the machinist-mate out of the way and ran towards the stern, his flashlight sweeping the catwalk. Stopping above the rear engine gondola, he knelt down to examine the heavy canvas shields inside the outer cover and saw they were riddled with jagged holes. They weren't made by machine-gun fire, he thought. Moreover, the L72 was not within fighter range of the enemy coast. The Zeppelin was nose down, had been for the last five, maybe ten minutes, as they descended to a lower altitude.

"Ice," he shouted, glancing over his shoulder at Dollmann.

"What?"

"Ice. It's being thrown off from the engines." He swept the girders on either side and found a small gash in the number three gas cell. "Wake the seamen in the bows," he yelled to Dollmann. "Tell them to inspect the cells above the control car and the midship gondolas."

Then, grabbing a can of dope, Ratz shinned up the vertical girder to repair the damage.

8

An engine coughed in the dark stillness of the night, spluttered uncertainly, then warmed to a deep-throated snarl. Roused from a light slumber, Farr rolled off the bed and slipped on the flying jacket which he'd left draped over a chair. About to leave, he noticed that the hurricane lamp on the chest of drawers was smoking badly and, turning the wick down, he raised the globe and blew out the flame. His vision temporarily gone, Farr groped his way towards the entrance, pushed the flap aside and stepped out of the tent.

A double row of oil lamps marked the runway and,

beyond their flickering light, Farr could see the blurred outline of an FE 2b taxi-ing up to the far end of the field away to his right. A blue light flashed near the fitters' marquee and tongues of flame appeared briefly from the exhausts of a 120-horsepower Austro Daimler engine. As he watched the aeroplane move slowly forward, the first two-seater reached the far end and turned on to the runway. Moments later, throttle wide open, the FE thundered past Farr and lifted off. That's Broadhurst away, he said to himself, recognising the burly figure seated behind and above the observer-gunner. Then, turning left, he followed the line of bell tents until he came to his office.

Lethbridge was huddled over an oil stove, a large cigar clamped between his teeth. Deep in thought, he didn't hear Farr enter the tent.

"Broadhurst's just taken off," Farr said quietly.

"Yeah?" Lethbridge looked up and, seeing who it was, quickly removed the cigar from his mouth and got to his feet. "I guess I'd better mark it on the board then?"

Farr nodded. "What's the special occasion?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"The cigar. I don't remember seeing you smoke one before, Frank."

"That you haven't. The Havanas arrived in a parcel from home late this afternoon. You want one?"

"No thanks," said Farr. "I think I'll stick to Gold Flake."

A plane thundered past the office marquee, the slipstream buffeting the tent walls. The oil stove flared in the draught, emitting black smoke which slowly dispersed as the flame died down again.

"That will be Sergeant Newton." Lethbridge unclipped a fountain pen from his top pocket, glanced at his wristwatch and recorded the departure time on the patrol programme displayed on the notice board. "How long since the first plane took off?" he asked.

"Three minutes."

"2017 hours then," Lethbridge said and entered the time against Broadhurst. His eyes flicked to the drawings of the L72 pinned alongside the patrol programme.

"That's some Zeppelin," he murmured.

Farr's eyes narrowed. "It's the biggest they've got," he said abruptly.

Moving round the table, Farr sat down. The in-tray was stacked with files awaiting his attention but, as always, he read the operations log first. There had been only two messages from Air Defence Headquarters during the time he'd been asleep, both of them entered by Broadhurst. The first, timed at 1855 hours, was an up-to-date weather forecast; the second, received half an hour later, reported increased wireless activity on the Zeppelin wavelengths and placed the squadron on 'Amber' alert.

"I see we're in for some rain and sleet later tonight," Farr said presently.

"I told you the weather would turn sour." Lethbridge returned to his chair by the stove and warmed his hands. "Question is, will the Huns change their minds and go home?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Frank. We don't even know if they're coming our way yet." The Zeppelins usually came in over the east coast between the Wash and Southend-on-Sea. Sometimes Air Defence Headquarters received advanced warning of their approach from the destroyers of the Harwich force on picquet duty in the North Sea but, more often than not, the first intimation came from the sound locators on the coast. But until the raiders were some distance inland, it was impossible to tell whether they were making for London or the Midlands. "Maybe we'll be stood down, maybe we won't. Until we hear different, the patrol programme stays the way it is."

"Too right." Lethbridge abandoned the oil stove, walked over to the entrance and parted the tent flap. "I see the ground crew have extinguished the runway lights," he said.

"Good." Farr eyed his in-tray. He had two hours to kill before they took off and no excuses. Reluctantly, he lifted the topmost file from the stack and opened it.

On this occasion, however, appearances turned out to be deceptive and he found that most of the files were for information only. There were a couple of routine letters

to sign, plus the ration indent for the next seventy-two hours and the weekly strength and casualty return. Private Hailwood had asked for an interview in writing and the Sergeant Major had scrawled, "Trouble at home – probably wants compassionate leave" at the foot of his letter. Lethbridge's application requesting a transfer to the Western Front came to light as he tossed the last file into the out-tray. For the first time ever Farr did not consign it straight to the wastepaper basket.

"You never give up, do you?" Farr smiled and held up the application. "How many have you submitted now, Frank?"

"Nine, maybe ten." Lethbridge shrugged his shoulders. "I guess I've lost count. Perhaps I should have joined the Lafayette Escadrille?"

"Why didn't you?"

"I'd have had a hard time communicating with the ground crew." Lethbridge grinned at him. "*Merci* and *bonjour* is about all the French I know."

"So you signed on with us instead."

Lethbridge examined his double-breasted tunic. "Looks like it," he said dryly, "this is an RFC uniform I'm wearing."

"You travelled three thousand miles to join a foreign army in a foreign war. What made you do that, Frank?"

Lethbridge frowned. He could tell Farr that he was simply anticipating events, that ever since the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, he had felt it could only be a question of time before America became involved. Farr would believe that because it looked as though President Wilson was about to declare war any day now, but he would be lying in his teeth. He had joined the war for reasons which were less than altruistic. Boredom, and the knowledge that he was not cut out to be a lawyer, had had something to do with it but, most of all it had been a conviction that to be locked in combat high in the sky was the greatest adventure and the most supreme test a man could face.

"The war seemed to be going badly for you and I was a fully-fledged pilot," he said, taking the easy way out.

"I didn't know that."

"Well, there's no reason why you should have. It just so happens that I saw my first aeroplane over Long Island in July 1913 and it was a case of love at first sight. I knew then that I had to be a pilot, that the family law firm of Lethbridge and McCloud was not for me. I guess that, deep down, my father knew it too. Anyway, he paid for my flying lessons." Lethbridge mashed his cigar in the cut-down shell case which Farr used as an ashtray. "It didn't make any difference though. When I got to Bordon, I still had to start right from the beginning again."

"I think you've just won your case," Farr said, smiling.

"You mean you're going to endorse my application?"

"It's what you want, isn't it?"

"You bet it is," said Lethbridge, but his voice lacked conviction. He'd got what he wanted, hadn't he? Then why could he picture Charlotte Ingold smiling reproachfully at him, and why was there this sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach?

Gayer opened the brown paper bag containing his iron rations and looked inside. Although the four slices of black bread, the morsel of cheese, the smoked sausage and the slice of liverwurst were supposed to last him until noon tomorrow, he was too damned hungry now to worry about breakfast. A few mouthfuls of soup at lunchtime, that was all he'd had to eat in the last twenty-four hours. It was always the same before a raid. He'd wake up in the morning sick with apprehension and unable to face the sight of food; then after they'd been airborne some hours, the nervous tension would ease off leaving him with a voracious appetite.

Gayer ate the smoked sausage and then spread the liverwurst over three slices of bread. Ehrlich and Fiesler had been relieved, Koch was fast asleep, the left side of his face resting on the chart table, Wenke was perched on the captain's chair, dozing fitfully, his head lolling backwards and forwards like a mechanical toy. Wenke had turned over the con to him at 2045 hours but the responsibility sat lightly on Gayer's shoulders. The Zeppelin was cruis-

ing at sixty miles an hour at an altitude of 12,000 feet, the windows were no longer frozen up and the compass was behaving itself. They were on course, there had been no reaction from the British destroyers on picquet duty in the North Sea when they'd slipped past Harwich, and in approximately an hour from now, they would be approaching the Thames estuary below Southend-on-Sea. Visibility was good, or was it? Gayer wiped the crumbs from his mouth and stared at the dark shape ahead. Rain clouds, he thought, glancing quickly at the barometer, but unless he was very much mistaken, they would pass above them. Gayer relaxed again and took another bite out of the open sandwich.

A euphoric feeling that there was no cause for alarm ended as he lurched forward and the slice of bread he was eating slipped from his fingers and fell on to the floor. The rain clouds loomed up in front of him and suddenly they were diving into the murk. The altimeter began unwinding like a runaway clock, the inclinometer showed they were descending at an angle of fourteen degrees and the air speed indicator was registering close on seventy-five miles an hour. There was no order, only a confused babble of voices yelling contradictory orders.

White-faced, trembling with anger, Gayer rounded on the relief elevator man. "For Christ's sake," he exploded, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Ehrlich shoved his relief out of the way, took over the wheel and trimmed the elevators back. The double chain clanked on the ratchet and for a moment he thought the controls were responding, but the movable horizontal surfaces on the tail failed to check their rate of descent.

"The ship is out of control, Herr Oberleutnant," Ehrlich said in a flat voice that was at odds with the horrified expression on his face.

Gayer reacted instinctively and reached for the toggle ropes above Ehrlich's head. There were fourteen rubberised ballast sacks strung beneath the keel, each containing two thousand pounds of water, and he began to empty them one by one.

The babble of voices died away when Wenke gave the

order to stop all engines, and realising that Gayer had his hands full, rang the telegraph himself. The airspeed indicator fell back but the altimeter went on unwinding and Wenke saw that they were already down to 9500 feet. He checked the inclinometer and then looked enquiringly to Gayer.

"Nine degrees, Friedrich?"

"That's a distinct improvement," Gayer said tensely.

Wenke nodded. "How many ballast sacks have you emptied?"

"Six."

Twelve thousand pounds; almost half the total they were carrying. Wenke frowned. How many more pounds would they need to shed to bring the ship back on to an even keel?

Ehrlich said, "The elevators are beginning to respond, Herr Oberleutnant."

"Thank God for that," said Gayer. The inclinometer was showing less than two degrees now but they were still descending, albeit slowly. He stretched out his left hand again and grasped another toggle. "How about it, Ehrlich?" he said quietly. "Can you bring the nose up?"

Ehrlich shook his head. "The horizontal planes won't move any further. They're at maximum elevation."

"I should be a bloody tram conductor," Gayer muttered.

"What's that, Friedrich?" Wenke asked sharply.

"It was meant to be a joke, sir. Not a very good one, I admit, but a joke all the same."

Gayer jerked the toggle, trimming their all-up weight by another 2000 pounds. He gripped the next one in line and waited, his eyes fixed on the inclinometer. There were just seven ballast sacks left now and once they were gone they'd have to jettison the bomb load, assuming the Zeppelin was still in one piece by that time. He told himself that the craftsmen at Löwenthal who'd built the L72 had done a fine job, that the polygonal main rings in the hull would hold up under the stress being imposed upon them, but a nightmare vision of the airship plunging into the sea with her spine broken still persisted. Then

the bows lifted, the inclinometer moved to horizontal and a loud sigh from Koch broke the tense silence as the ship settled back on an even keel.

"My congratulations, Friedrich," Wenke said quietly. "You did a magnificent job."

Gayer smiled. Words of praise from Wenke were a rarity.

"Now I want a damage report."

The smile disappeared from Gayer's face. Wenke was pointing towards the roof and suddenly the liverwurst and the smoked sausage were two lead weights in his stomach. The ladder was directly behind him and he turned to face it with more than a little reluctance. But, mustering his courage, he went on up, opened the hatch and then climbed out on to the roof of the control car.

The airship was swaying in the stiff breeze and the rain lashed his face. For a few terrifying moments, Gayer clung to the vertical ladder leading to the keel, his arms and legs trembling. Then, steeling himself to ignore the enervating effects of vertigo, he placed his left foot on the bottom rung. Step by step, his heart pounding like a runaway steam engine, he made his way to the top. Holding on like grim death with one hand, he opened the second hatch and scrambled into the hull. Unable to see anything but blackness, he hooked his right foot into the lattice-work of a girder to steady himself while he tugged the flashlight from the pocket of his bridge coat.

His fingers were numb and still shaking. He could just about feel the switch with his thumb but the simple task of easing it forward required a dexterity that seemed beyond him. He swore at it and resorted to brute force and ignorance before it suddenly dawned on him that he was holding the flashlight the wrong way round, back to front. "Eureka," Gayer shouted, reversing the flashlight and switching it on.

The beam of light illuminated three pairs of feet in rope-soled shoes and, almost of its own accord, travelled swiftly upwards to three owl-like faces. The uncontrolled descent had been a horrifying experience for everyone and some members of the crew had performed less well

than others. Perhaps in the circumstances it wasn't altogether surprising that the seamen standing in front of him had been too frightened to think of manning the top gun platform; all the same, he noticed that they'd had the presence of mind to grab their parachutes.

"You miserable little bastards," Gayer said, his voice grating with anger. "If you're not on the top platform by the time I've finished counting up to ten, you'll spend the next twenty-eight days in the cells."

Three pairs of eyes blinked at him; then the message sank in and there was a concerted stampede for the ladder.

Gayer left them to it and moved slowly aft, checking the gas cells on either side of the catwalk. Ratz; where the hell was the sailmaker? Was he another frightened rabbit too petrified to do his job? Maybe Wenke had been right after all; maybe he should have left him to the tender mercies of Police Sergeant Lehr and found a replacement? The silent recriminations died as a bobbing light came slowly towards him from the stern.

"Is that you, Ratz?" he shouted.

"No, Herr Oberleutnant. It's me – Molders."

Ratz was somewhere between them then, possibly unconscious. A brilliant deduction. Gayer snorted; with his highly-developed intuition he should have been a detective like Lehr. He passed numbers 15 and 16 gas cells thinking how curious it was that they should be numbered from stern to bows, evens to port, odds to starboard. Surely logic demanded it should be the other way round? Gayer swept his flashlight from side to side and up and down. Nothing wrong with 13 and 14 cells, he observed, and moved on again to find number 12 hanging limply in shreds. A team of craftsmen had laboured God knows how many hours glueing thousands of pieces of goldbeaters' skin from cattle membrane to the inside of the cotton fabric to make the cell leakproof. Now, all their hard work counted for nothing and the airship had lost 125,000 cubic feet of hydrogen.

"A right bloody shambles," he pronounced.

"What is?" Molders demanded from close by.

"Number 12 gas cell," said Gayer.

"Petty Officer Ratz doesn't look too good either."

Gayer swung round and trained his flashlight on the catwalk. Ratz was lying face down, his head over to one side, his left arm extended as though trying to draw Gayer's attention to the ruptured gas cell ten feet away.

"Is he alive, Chief?" Gayer asked softly.

"Just about," Molders grunted. "There's an ugly-looking gash in his skull."

Gayer backed off several paces. It was easy to see what had caused the wound. The longitudinal girders were chewed to bits and clearly Ratz had stopped a piece of flying metal. That much was self-evident, the rest wasn't. Kneeling down, he unclipped the oblong-shaped midships hatch and opened it to find the portside engine gondola upside down, the stanchions and access ladder bent in the shape of a letter 'U'.

"I'd better get a first-aid pack and see to Ratz," Molders said.

"You may have quite a few casualties to deal with, Chief." Gayer beckoned the warrant officer to come nearer, then trained his flashlight on the tangled wreckage below the keel.

"Jesus Christ." Molders shook his head. "Jesus Christ," he repeated in an awed voice, "you wouldn't think one lousy bracing wire could do so much damage."

It seemed an incredible explanation for the accident but after examining the wreckage more closely, Gayer realised the chief engineer was right. It was evident that from the moment they'd left Nordholtz, one of the bracing wires on the midships portside engine had been gradually working loose until, like a cork drawn from a bottle, the splicing had suddenly given way and the wire had streamed towards the propeller. The whirling blade had obviously flicked it downwards and the trailing end had wound itself round the propeller shaft. The wire had then tightened, buckled the supporting pylons and winched the gondola upward against the hull. At that point, the seventeen-foot propeller had chewed into the gangway, severing the longitudinal girders and biting

deep into the catwalk. And it didn't need much imagination to guess that a piece of the shattered screw had subsequently ripped the number 12 gas cell to shreds and made the ship nose heavy. "Who's down there?" he asked abruptly.

"Vermehren. Adler should have come off watch more than an hour ago but no doubt he's still with Vermehren." Molders sounded aggrieved that Adler should have disobeyed his standing orders and remained in the gondola.

"They'll have to wait their turn, Chief, along with Ratz."

"What are you saying? Ratz could be dying and those are my men down there. Do you think I'm going to stand here and do nothing?"

"The Captain has called for a damage report and we have a job of work to do." Gayer paused, amazed that he could be so coldly efficient, that Molders no longer made him feel inadequate. "Now, what about the other gas cells – numbers 1 to 10?"

"They're okay, Herr Oberleutnant."

"And the off-duty mechanics in the stern section?"

"They're all right too," said Molders. "A little white and shaken."

"Aren't we all." Gayer closed the hatch and stood up. "There's nothing wrong with the other five Maybach engines but you'd better check the aluminium slip tanks to see if we've lost any fuel. Meanwhile, I'm going to call the Captain on the voice-pipe and give him a preliminary report."

Gayer turned about and walked off towards the bows. The L72 was drifting helplessly at 8500 feet and doubtless Wenke was becoming increasingly agitated about it. The thought prompted him to quicken his stride and, reaching the voice-pipe near the forrard hatch, he lifted the cover, whistled up the control car and gave Wenke the facts as he knew them.

Wenke listened without interruption, then said, "All right, Friedrich, you know what to do," and closed the voice-pipe.

Gayer didn't hear the telegraph but a few moments

later, five Maybachs thundered into life and the Zeppelin slowly got under way again.

9

Molders checked the last of the aluminium slip tanks and moved aft to attend to Gerhold Ratz. On his instructions, the off-duty watch had placed Ratz in one of the hammocks strung between the girders in the stern and had collected a medical haversack from the rear engine gondola. They were waiting for him now, three lugubrious mechanics whose mournful expressions reminded him of pallbearers at a funeral.

"I think he's going to kick the bucket, Chief."

Hassell, Molders thought, only Hassell could be such a cheerful little ray of sunshine at a time like this. "You're a bloody doctor, are you?" he said angrily.

"No, but he looks pretty bad to me," Hassell said unabashed.

Molders trained the flashlight into Hassell's eyes. "Why don't you shut your stupid mouth and lower the hammock. Do you think I'm ten feet tall?"

"Only in a manner of speaking."

"Who said that?" Molders whirled round to face the other two men. "Berger? Olbricht?"

"It was me, Chief," Berger said quietly. "I meant it as a compliment."

"Never mind the compliments, Berger. Give Hassell a hand with the hammock and then hold this flashlight above the patient's head so that I can see what I'm doing."

"Right."

The patient. Molders scowled; now he was talking like a doctor, which was some joke considering his medical knowledge was practically non-existent.

"How's that?" Berger asked presently. "Is the hammock low enough for you now, Chief?"

"It'll do." Molders stepped forward and saw at a glance that Hassell was right. Gerhold did look bad; his face was ashen and wet with perspiration, there was a bluish tinge to his lips and he was breathing erratically.

"Who's got the medical haversack?" he asked grimly.

"I have," said Olbricht.

"Sulphur powder." Olbricht slapped the tin into his outstretched hand and he sprinkled the powder into the ugly-looking gash in Gerhold's skull. "Shell dressing."

"Just a second, Chief, I have to remove the protective wrapper first." Olbricht looked inside the canvas haversack for a pair of scissors and somehow managed to drop the shell dressing on to the floor in the process.

"You clumsy great ox," Molders said, exasperated. "Can't anyone do anything right?"

"Seems like we're fated on this trip," Hassell said morosely.

Gayer shivered inside his bridge coat. The top gun platform was the most exposed and easily the most God-forsaken duty station in the whole damned Zeppelin. Usually he felt sorry for the seamen who were required to man the three Maxim machine guns when the L72 was below 13,000 feet and within reach of the British night fighters, but not tonight. Usually he offered them a drink of Schnapps to ward off the cold, but not tonight. Tonight they could stay up here in the pissing rain and freeze to death in their oilskins for all he cared.

"See you in the morning," Gayer said, and moved towards the ladder. "Meantime, keep up the good work."

He climbed down to the keel and then walked towards the shaft of light in the stern. Surgeon Molders, he thought, performing miracles with a first-aid kit that was barely adequate for cuts and bruises. The chief engineer seemed likely to have another opportunity to demonstrate his medical skills, assuming they managed to rescue the two men trapped inside the midships engine gondola.

Adler and Vermehren; he could place their faces, and

they had never been in trouble, but that was about the sum total of his knowledge. Until a few short hours ago, Gayer had been under the impression that he knew Petty Officer Ratz rather well. Ratz was a good sailmaker but he had a quick temper; he was twenty-four years old, single, and came from Stettin. He had a widowed mother, and a sister a year younger than himself whose husband had been killed at Bremervorde. Then Sergeant Lehr had opened his eyes to the fact that Ratz was a political agitator and it seemed he hardly knew the man at all.

"How is Petty Officer Ratz?" Gayer asked, drawing near Molders.

"I've done the best I can for him." Molders sucked on his teeth. "Mind you, that's not saying much."

He was plumb right, Gayer thought. The shell dressing had been wound round his forehead a couple of times, then looped under his chin, up and over the crown of his head and back down again to be held in place with a large safety pin.

"It's a bit loose, isn't it, Chief?" he said judiciously.

"Has to be," said Molders. "Gerhold is breathing through his mouth."

"Yes. Well, it looks as though you've made him as comfortable as possible. Now we'd better see what we can do for Adler and Vermehren."

Molders nodded, told Berger to stay with Ratz and ordered Hassell and Olbricht to bring a sledgehammer and two coils of rope with them. Then, slinging the medical haversack over one shoulder, he hurried after the Executive Officer.

"What exactly is going on in the control car, Herr Oberleutnant?" he asked.

"They're taking us round and round in circles, Chief. I think we're slowly gaining altitude, but it's hard to tell from the top gun platform."

"Do you reckon we'll turn back?"

Gayer frowned. They had shed half the ballast and one engine was kaput. That meant their cruising speed was reduced to approximately fifty miles an hour and they were unlikely to do much more than a shade under sixty

if they went flat out. It would take them at least another two hours to reach London and first light was at 0600. Unless they aborted, daylight would find them still over England.

"Of course we will," he said presently. "It would be madness to press on."

"Yes, sir." Molders knelt down, opened the midships hatch and stared at the U-shaped access ladder below. "May I please borrow your flashlight, Herr Oberleutnant? I've left mine with Berger."

"Certainly." Gayer passed the flashlight to Molders and then crouched over the open hatch. "I don't know what you think, Chief, but it seems to me that I'll have to go down backwards and do a smart about-turn at the bottom of the U before I climb up to the gondola."

"You're staying here, Herr Oberleutnant. This is my job."

"Nonsense. I'm much taller than you are; I'd only have to climb one rung to reach the hatch."

"Which happens to be buckled," said Molders.

"So what?"

"Well, I fancy I'm more at home with a sledgehammer than you are, sir."

Gayer rubbed his jaw. Molders definitely had a point. Moreover, the chief engineer didn't suffer from vertigo, which was another consideration. "All right, you win, Chief. But don't take any unnecessary risks."

"I don't intend to," said Molders.

Returning the flashlight to Gayer, Molders stood up and in a few brief words told Hassell and Olbricht exactly what he wanted them to do. Both men then uncoiled the ropes and lashed them to the vertical girders on the starboard side of the catwalk, while Molders tied the opposite ends in two separate bowlines around his waist and adjusted the medical haversack to carry it bandolier fashion across his chest. That done, he sat down facing the access ladder and planted both feet on a rung.

"Well, here goes," he said.

"Good luck," said Gayer.

Molders grimaced, took a firm grip on the ladder and

began to climb down. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven; he counted off the rungs, his lips barely moving. He reached the bend in the ladder, slowly turned about and, looking up, signalled Gayer to direct his flashlight on to the engine gondola. Hassell lay flat on his stomach, inched himself forward over the open hatch and with Olbricht hanging on to his legs, lowered the sledge-hammer down to the chief engineer.

Molders grabbed hold of the shaft with one hand and started climbing again. The rain drove into his face and it seemed to him that the whole damned structure was swaying in the slipstream. His mouth dry as dust, he went on up, his head and shoulders, then his chest, gradually appearing above the wrecked gondola. One of the two clips securing the hatch was bent while the other had sheared off, leaving only a few inches of metal to aim at with the sledgehammer.

He attacked the smaller clip first, believing it would prove the more difficult to open, only to discover that it gave way under one blow. The second clip however was a sight more obstinate. Molders gave it several gentle taps to begin with, then, finding the clip still refused to budge, began to hammer away for all he was worth. He saw the clip move fractionally, took a deep breath and swung the sledgehammer at it again, putting every ounce of his strength behind the blow. The clip sprang free and the sledgehammer flew from his grasp and sailed out into space. Losing his balance, Molders followed it, screaming like a gull.

He fell twenty feet before the ropes held him; then, winded by the sudden jerk against his stomach, he swung back and forth, a human pendulum. The whirling fourteen-foot propeller blade on the starboard engine loomed perilously close with each forward motion and Molders closed his eyes and prayed as he had never prayed in his life before. He began to twist round and round like a spinning top in the slipstream; then, still twirling and swinging backwards and forwards, he found himself slowly ascending.

Twenty feet became fifteen, then ten, then five; his

back thumped against a solid metal object, he described another circle and bruised the left kneecap on the protruding edge of the radiator mounted on the roof of the portside engine gondola. The distorted ladder appeared in front of his nose and he grabbed one of the rungs with both hands. A tug of war developed with Hassell and Olbricht who seemed determined to haul him back into the keel, but Molders hung on like grim death. The last ten minutes had been a heart-stopping nightmare, but he had got this far and he wasn't about to go back to the beginning to start all over again. He said so repeatedly in no uncertain terms and while Hassell and Olbricht couldn't hear the string of four-letter words, they finally caught on and stopped heaving on the lines.

For a few minutes, Molders hugged the ladder unable to move either up or down. Then his limbs finally stopped trembling and he opened the hatch and crawled inside the gondola.

Vermehren said, "Hullo, Chief, nice of you to drop in."

"You stupid prick," Molders said between deep breaths. He found himself sliding on a patch of oil and reached out to grab hold of what he thought was an exhaust pipe.

The exhaust pipe screamed long and high.

"That's Adler," Vermehren said in a bemused tone of voice. "I think he's broken a leg."

Terrific, Molders thought, absolutely bloody terrific. Moving Adler was out of the question so he would have to give him a shot of morphine to ease the pain. He unbuckled the medical haversack, groped inside and found an ampoule of morphine and a hypodermic syringe in a cardboard tube. He opened the tube, extracted the syringe, jabbed the needle into the ampoule and pulled the plunger, filling the hypodermic with morphine.

"All right, Adler," he said cheerfully, "let's have a wrist."

"No use talking to him, Chief, he's unconscious."

"Good," said Molders. "With any luck, he won't feel a thing."

Molders found a wrist and massaged one of the veins on the back, rubbing it hard until it stood out from the

loose flesh. Then he jabbed the needle into the vein and emptied the syringe. Satisfied he had done the best he could for Adler, Molders untied one of the bowlines around his waist and passed the rope end to Vermehren.

"Here," he said, "tie yourself on to this."

"Are we going upstairs, Chief?"

"We're not spending the rest of the night here, that's for sure."

"Thank God," said Vermehren. "I'd go clear off my rocker if I had to stay in this coffin much longer."

"Save your breath and give a jerk on the rope."

"What for?"

"To let them know you're coming up," Molders said, and shoved the mechanic towards the hatch.

Vermehren tugged on the line and went out head first. Molders groped around in the gondola, discovered a couple of oil-stained blankets and draped them over Adler to keep him warm. And suddenly Molders felt exhausted, suddenly it was all he could do to crawl out of the gondola and on up to the keel. Hassell and Olbricht gave him a helping hand as his head and shoulders appeared in the hatchway, grabbing him under the arms to haul him aboard. Then everybody was slapping him on the back.

"Marvellous," Gayer said, "bloody marvellous, Chief. If it's the last thing I do, I'll get you a medal for this when we get back."

"If we get back," Hassell said gloomily.

Farr stubbed out his fifth cigarette in the cut-down shell case and then read his umpteenth attempt at a letter to Laura. It said:

> I am writing this in the squadron office. The marquee reeks of stale cigarette smoke and the aroma of Havana cigars; it is ten fifteen pm, the rain shows no signs of easing off and I am about to go out on patrol with Frank Lethbridge. I have a flask of whisky at my elbow but I haven't touched a drop. I only mention these irrelevant details in case you are tempted to dismiss this

letter as the ramblings of a man who has had too much to drink and is not in possession of all his faculties.

I really have only two things to say. Firstly, it was wonderful to see you again this morning and I can't remember a lunch I've enjoyed as much. Secondly, I know you would like us to remain good friends, but I'm afraid that's impossible. I cannot disguise my feelings for you and though you try to hide it, I'm vain enough to believe you care very deeply for me. However, it would seem that we do have a small problem, and I am of course referring to your artificial right foot. You regard it as an insurmountable barrier to our future happiness whereas I see your disfigurement in a very different light. You were a soldier and you were wounded in action; had our positions been reversed, I know damned well that it wouldn't make the slightest difference to you that I no longer had two good feet to stand on. So, I just don't understand why you should think I don't feel the same way about you. This war can't last for ever but the siege of Seaton Square most certainly will unless Miss Laura Theobalds agrees to become Mrs Matthew Farr. You see, I love you very much and always will.

Farr read the letter a second time. It was perhaps slightly immature, adolescent even, but it was how he felt and no one had ever accused him of being a literary genius. He folded the foolscap page in three, tucked it into an official envelope, gummed the flap down and addressed it to Miss Laura Theobalds, 18, Seaton Square, London, S.W.1.

"I don't suppose you happen to have a stamp on you, do you, Frank?" he asked.

"Afraid not," said Lethbridge.

"Never mind." Farr tossed the letter into the out-tray, examined the loose change in his pocked and placed a penny on top of the envelope. "You're looking very pensive, Frank," he said. "Got something on your mind?"

"Only the weather." Lethbridge unwrapped another cigar, pierced the end with a match and lit it. "I think it's

going to wash everything out – the cookhouse – this tent – the Huns."

"No, they'll be over. It as good as says so right here in the operations log. 'Seven Zeppelins definitely located eight nautical miles south-west of Borkum Island by Admiralty radio direction-finding stations at 1610 hours. Indications of three possibly five more Zeppelins in triangle bounded by Heligoland, Wangeroog Island and Elbe beacon.' They're planning the biggest raid of the war, Frank, and the odd rain shower isn't going to deter them."

"1610 hours and we got the message forty minutes ago." Lethbridge shook his head. "They've got a fine sense of urgency down at Air Defence Headquarters. I guess the message got buried under a file, then somebody unearthed it and decided to pass it on just to keep us on our toes."

"You're reading too much into it," said Farr. "We're not the easiest people to reach. There are no less than three telephone exchanges between us and London. Sometimes there is a fault or a delay on one of the lines."

"You can say that again." Lethbridge frowned. Why the hell was he acting like a bear with a sore head? Farr wasn't to blame for the mess he'd gotten himself into. What did Charlotte Ingold mean to him anyway? Sure, he liked her a lot and she was fun to have around, but he wasn't planning to spend the rest of his life with her, was he?

"How's that girl of yours, Frank?"

The question came like a bolt out of the blue. Take your time, Lethbridge told himself, don't rush it. "What girl?" he asked, looking straight at Farr.

"Oh, come on, Frank, you know what I'm talking about. Every time we're stood down, a GS bicycle goes missing from the stores, and I know you're not that keen on physical exercise."

"So I have a girl. That's not a crime, is it?"

"No, of course not. I just thought something was bothering you, that's all."

"She's just a girl," Lethbridge said slowly, "no more."

The field telephone buzzed. Farr lifted it off the box and pressed the receiver to his ear. The voice was faint, barely audible, and there was a lot of induction on the line. That was not unusual because they were linked to the military exchange in St Albans by eight miles of assault cable strung out over fields and ditches. Three maybe four miles was the maximum range for a battery-powered field telephone and you needed keen hearing to make the system work beyond that distance. Sometimes though, as in this instance, it wasn't necessary to hear every word to get the gist of the message.

Farr put the phone down, looked up from the ops log and grinned. "We're in business, Frank. The sound locators detected an intruder over Southwold twenty minutes ago."

Lethbridge glanced at the patrol programme and checked the time against his wristwatch. "Fourteen minutes before it's our turn to go," he muttered. "Do we shove off now or wait for our allotted time?"

"We go now," said Farr. "Get Yarborough in here to relieve me."

"Right." Lethbridge mashed his cigar in the shell case and ducked out of the tent.

Farr eyed the field telephone and wondered if he had time to call Laura. He could have warned her over lunch that a raid was in the offing but he'd had other things on his mind. He started to crank the handle to raise the military exchange at St Albans, then decided it would take them all night to put through a call to a civilian number. He bent down, retrieved his previous attempts to compose a letter to her from the wastepaper basket, placed the screwed-up bits of paper in the shell case and struck a match.

"Trying to burn the place down, sir?"

Farr looked round and saw Yarborough standing rigidly to attention. There were times when he was convinced the youthful-looking pilot had no business to be wearing an RFC uniform, that any day now he would receive a letter from an irate headmaster with proof that Yarborough was a sixteen-year-old schoolboy.

"Broadhurst and Sergeant Newton are due back at 2250," he said, ignoring Yarborough's childish attempt at humour. "You might as well leave the runway lights on after I've taken off."

"Yes, sir."

Farr gave the ashes in the shell case a final stir with a ruler, buttoned his flying jacket, and slipped the flask of whisky into his pocket. "I suppose Lethbridge told you about the intruder over Southwold?"

"He did burble something about it," said Yarborough.

"Well, it's all there in the ops log." Farr moved towards the entrance and lifted the tent flat. "Oh," he said, snapping his fingers, "one last thing. Before you go out on patrol, just make sure that Lieutenant Moorhouse is wide awake and manning this telephone."

Dropping the flap, Farr left the tent. The runway lights were burning and as he walked towards the dispersal area near the fitters' marquee, he heard Lethbridge shout, "Contact", and seconds later a ninety-horsepower engine stuttered fitfully and then ran up.

Wenke was going to press on. Gayer supposed he should have known that even before he started to make his report, should have known it the moment he entered the control car and saw Wenke poring over the chart with August Koch, measuring the distance to Southend-on-Sea from their present position with a pair of dividers. They had shed half their ballast, they had lost five per cent of their buoyancy, and their maximum speed had been cut to less than sixty. It had taken them an hour and ten minutes to gain an extra thousand feet and time was running out, but he could tell from the pugnacious expression on Wenke's face that these factors would not deter him.

"This rain could turn to sleet," Gayer said, drawing to a conclusion. "If it does, our all-up weight will increase dramatically."

"Are you advocating that we should turn back?" Wenke asked in an icy voice.

"I think it's the only sensible thing to do in the circum-

stances, sir." Gayer looked to Koch for support but the navigator studiously avoided his gaze.

"I think you are exaggerating our difficulties, Herr Oberleutnant. I have been ordered to attack London and that is what I intend to do. We may have lost an engine but this is still the biggest and most powerful Zeppelin in the entire fleet. If we fail to press home our attack, then there is no future for the Naval Airship Division."

So that's it, Gayer thought, we're going to commit suicide to keep Fregattenkapitan Strasser in business. Or was it that Wenke was too unsure of his own position and lacked the moral courage to turn back?

"We'll have to descend below the cloud base for each bombing run," he said.

"I believe that is the usual practice," Wenke said acidly.

"And we only have 14,000 pounds of ballast to play with. It may not be enough."

"We're carrying five tons of high explosive. In effect, that increases our ballast to 24,000 pounds."

"Our ship was stabilised for a pre-selected pressure height of 20,000 feet." Gayer cleared his throat nervously. "This allows us to descend or ascend to any altitude below that ceiling without the automatic gas valves blowing off."

"I'm aware of that, Herr Oberleutnant," Wenke said, his voice steelier by the minute.

"Yes, sir." Gayer paused. He was obviously wasting his breath and maybe Wenke would place him under arrest for insolence, but it had to be said. "I was merely trying to point out that we've lost a gas cell and as a result we're no longer stabilised."

Wenke nodded curtly, then turned to Koch. "Have you worked out our course yet?"

"Yes, sir. Steer two one seven, helmsman."

"Steer two one seven," Fiesler repeated and turned the rudder wheel.

Gayer stared at the compass, watched the needle swing on to the bearing. Perhaps the rain would ease off, perhaps Wenke would bring them home safe and sound? Perhaps he still believed in miracles?

"I think we'll jettison the heavies, Friedrich."

Gayer blinked. "The 660-pounders?" he said, stunned.

"Yes. It will give us that extra bit of lift before we go in on the first bombing run."

"When should I jettison them?"

"Now," said Wenke.

Gayer moved forward and tripped the release switches. Six pear-shaped bombs left the racks under the hull to plunge harmlessly into the sea.

2215 Hours
Thursday, March 22nd, 1917
to
0510 Hours
Friday, March 23rd, 1917

10

Farr leaned over the left side of the cockpit and peered down. The rain had stopped but there was still a lot of cloud shielding the moon, making visibility none too good. Nevertheless, he was pretty sure the lightish grey area he could see 4000 feet below the port wing was Hampstead Heath. In two or three minutes' time he would reach the Thames and make a 170-degree turn to starboard and head for Harrow-on-the-Hill.

London was deathly quiet, no searchlights, no guns, no bombs falling from the sky. Farr wondered what had happened to the intruder the sound locators had detected over Southwold more than an hour ago. Maybe the Zeppelin had changed course and was now making for the Midlands? Or perhaps it was somewhere up there in the clouds, engines shut down and about to make a silent attack? Or had the Kapitanleutnant in command decided to call it a night and go home? What if it were a false alarm? The sound locators were not infallible and there was such a thing as human error. Anything was possible, and speculating what might or might not be was simply a waste of time and mental effort. The patrol programme laid down by Air Defence Headquarters was clear enough; he would patrol his allotted sector until something happened or the fuel gauge dictated it was time to return home. Spotting the river directly ahead, Farr banked to starboard and began the dog-leg to Harrow.

A fine spray of hot lubricating oil streamed into his face and smeared the goggles protecting his eyes. Within a matter of seconds, the fine spray became a jet. Then one of the pistons started knocking.

"Shit." Farr tried to wipe the goggles clean but the leather gauntlet on his left hand only made things worse. "Shit, shit, shit," he repeated.

The knock grew louder, metal against metal. Big end bearing gone, he thought, rocker cover gasket blown, oil pressure dropping fast. No prizes for guessing it wouldn't be long before the sodding engine packed up on him; no prizes either for guessing whose fault it was. He'd overtaxed the engine, demanded too much from it that morning when he'd succeeded in getting the plane airborne inside sixty feet. Side-slipping, Farr began to lose altitude.

He leaned over the starboard side of the cockpit. The A6 trunk road would lead him home, but where the hell was it for God's sake? He glanced at the altimeter – 3000 and unwinding and the engine shaking itself to pieces. A forced landing in a built-up area; now wouldn't that be fun? He leaned further out, saw an irregular silver patch on the ground below and relaxed. Water – the Welsh Harp north of Cricklewood and plenty of open space beyond. He could put down where he liked if he didn't mind facing a long walk to Saxon's Farm. There'd be no problems about command though; Broadhurst should have returned from patrol ages ago and he'd automatically run the show in his absence. Meantime, he would have to spend the rest of the night in a lonely field miles from anywhere.

"Bugger that for a lark," Farr muttered to himself and pointed the nose of his plane in the direction of the A6 trunk road.

The engine backfired, died on him, then picked up again and ran sluggishly. Farr gave the goggles another wipe, saw that the altimeter was registering 500 feet, knew he couldn't hold the BE in the air much longer and decided it was time he found a nice, large, open field like the one ahead. He throttled back; a copse, a row of cottages and an isolated farmhouse slipped beneath him. A hundred, fifty, twenty-five feet; the engine dying, the ground coming up to meet him.

"Easy does it," he cautioned himself, "easy does it."

The plane bounced, rose several feet into the air and then thumped down again. Farr cut the switches and held his breath, hoping the plane would stop rolling before it

met the hedgerow that was looming up in front. Capricious to the end, the BE ploughed through the obstacle and nose-dived into a ditch. Thrown forward by the sudden impact, Farr smashed into the instrument panel, his forehead hitting the switches. A trickle of blood oozed under the leather flying helmet and ran down the right side of his face.

"Sod it," Farr said angrily. He ripped the gauntlets off, undid the button under his chin and removed his helmet and goggles. Then, unbuckling the seat belt, he clambered out of the cockpit. His legs felt decidedly shaky and, digging the hip flask out of his pocket, he unscrewed the cap and took a large swig of whisky. "That's better," he said, and took another gulp. "Much better."

Farr replaced the cap, slipped the flask into his pocket and gingerly explored the cut in his forehead above the right eye. It was about an inch long but nothing like as deep as the bleeding had led him to believe. Nor would it need stitching; a piece of lint and a finger bandage would do the job very nicely, he thought, and then remembered he didn't have a first-aid kit in the plane. Moistening his handkerchief with a gob of spittle, he removed the oil from around the cut and gave his face a quick wipe over. That done, he climbed back into the cockpit, unclipped the magazine from the Lewis gun, collected the two spare drums from the bin and jumped out again.

Farr looked about him. He decided the isolated farmhouse and the row of cottages were somewhere to his left and rear, and set off across the field keeping parallel with the hedgerow. Five minutes later, he came upon another hedgerow at right angles to the first and moving to his right, discovered a five-bar gate twenty yards further on. Holding the drum magazines under one arm, he opened the gate and walked through into a narrow sunken lane. Then, recalling his own standing orders on the subject with a wry smile, he closed the gate behind him before striding off towards the row of cottages he'd seen from the air.

In the stillness, Farr heard a faint creaking noise and was still trying to place it when a burly figure on a bicycle

rounded the bend in the lane ahead and rode towards him. Braking to a halt, the police constable dismounted, dropped his bicycle and reached under his raincape for a truncheon.

"What are you doing walking about here at this time of night?" he demanded. "Don't you know there's a raid on?"

"I'm a pilot," Farr said.

"That's a likely story. The nearest airfield is miles away." The constable moved a little nearer, smacking the truncheon against the palm of his left hand.

He was, Farr noted, a rather elderly man and somewhat overweight. "I had to make a forced landing." Farr jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "My plane's back there in the meadow."

"Can I ask what you are carrying under your left arm, sir?"

"Three drums of ammunition. I couldn't risk leaving them there with the Lewis gun." Farr placed the magazines on the ground, unbuttoned the leather coat, dipped a hand inside the collar of his roll-neck sweater and fished out two identity tags. "7841 Major Farr, M." he said tersely. "Want to take a look for yourself?"

"No, sir, I'll take your word for it. I can see now that you're an officer and a gentleman."

Farr closed his eyes. Oh, my God, he thought, a fatter version of the obsequious Parker. "Where's the nearest village, Constable?" he enquired politely.

"Elstree's a mile down the road. I've just come from there."

Elstree. Farr rubbed his jaw; he was roughly ten miles from Saxon's Farm then. "I presume St Albans lies in that direction?" he said, pointing behind him.

"Yes, sir."

"Mind if I borrow your bike?"

"My bicycle? Well, I don't know about that, sir."

"This is an emergency," Farr said. "I'll see that you get it back first thing in the morning. That's a promise." He walked past the police constable and picked up the bicycle. "Tell you what, you keep the Lewis gun magazines.

That's a fair exchange, isn't it?"

"Where did you say your plane was, sir?"

"In the meadow on your right." Farr swung a leg over the bicycle and perched himself on the saddle. "I'd be grateful if you'd keep an eye on it," he said, and rode off into the dark, wobbling at first until he got the hang of it.

Laura hitched the blanket around her shoulders. The wine cellar might be the safest place in the house but it was also the coldest. An ideal air-raid shelter, her father had said, pointing to the walls which were eighteen inches thick and the steel joists under the stone floor of the kitchen directly above, while completely overlooking the fact that everyone inside would soon be suffocated if the house came down on top of it.

"It is chilly down here, isn't it?" Winifred Theobalds leaned forward and adjusted the rug, tucking the hem under her shoes. "My feet are absolutely frozen."

Laura smiled at her mother. "Why don't we go upstairs to bed?"

"In the middle of an air raid? With those beastly Zeppelins overhead? Your father would have something to say about that if he were here. Besides, one has to think of the servants. You know what Parker is like."

Laura did, only too well. Nobody was more anxious to take cover when the alarm sounded than Parker, but if they were to leave the cellar before the 'all clear' he would consider it his bounden duty to do likewise. Parker was apt to carry his views on what was the done thing to extremes. Even when they were sheltering in the cellar, he insisted that 'upstairs' should be separated from 'downstairs' by several wine racks. It was difficult to imagine a more ridiculous situation, even allowing for the fact that Parker was a fearful snob.

"I'm so glad Matthew called on you this morning. It was thoughtful of him."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Laura said brusquely.

"Such a nice young man."

For nice read suitable, Laura thought. Farr and Thompson, lace makers of Nottingham. The Farrs were

no longer in 'trade', but Matthew's grandfather had left the family extremely well provided for. Coal, iron, steel, property, the Great Northern Railway and the Cunard White Star Line; their investments were sound, practically gilt edged.

"He's very fond of you, my dear."

"Yes, Mother, I know."

"Is that all you can say? Really, Laura, I sometimes wonder what has come over you. Matthew is so obviously devoted to you, yet you seem determined to keep him at arm's length."

"Would it make you happy if I went to bed with him? I almost did, you know."

"Laura." Shock was compounded with a horror that the servants could hear every word.

"Well, it happens to be true," Laura said in a low voice.

Thursday, August 17th: Matthew's squadron had been stood down and she had come off ward duty at five in the evening. Matthew had managed to get two seats in the stalls at His Majesty's for *Chu Chin Chow* and afterwards they had dined at the Ritz. And then, when they were walking along Piccadilly looking for a cab to take her back to Clerkenwell, Matthew had said, "I suppose you'd be in serious trouble with matron if you weren't in by twelve?" And trying to be coquettish, she had said, "Why, Matthew Farr, I do believe you're trying to lead me astray", which was quite the wrong thing to say because she had wanted to spend the night with him and he had shied away, embarrassed and full of apologies.

"Your father was right. We should never have let you join the VADs. You've been mixing with quite the wrong kind of people."

"Like Jane Carmichael, for instance?"

"No, I do not mean Jane Carmichael. She comes from a very good family and has been properly brought up."

Properly brought up? Well, that might be true but for all that she couldn't help liking her, Jane was still the most immoral girl she had ever met. Not that Jane had corrupted her in any way; the maimed and the dying the orderlies carried into her ward every night had done that.

Their suppurating wounds, the disgusting smell of gangrene and the obscene blisters caused by mustard gas had made every decorum, every convention seem stupid and futile. Matthew had been wounded in the leg at Loos and she had lived with the secret dread that he might not be quite so lucky next time.

"I think you're being very foolish where Matthew is concerned."

Laura stared at the tartan rug across her knees. Her mother was about to return to a familiar theme. Matthew was everything she could want in a husband and she would be lucky to find another man who would be so patient with her or so loyal and understanding. It was the loyal and understanding bit that stuck in her throat.

"I do care for Matthew," Laura said slowly. "In fact, you've no idea, Mother, just how much I do care, but I can't forget how easily Matthew was persuaded by you and father to wait a year."

"We were wrong. You shouldn't blame him for respecting our wishes."

"But that's the whole point. He did respect your wishes and not mine. Matthew knew I was against the idea and I think it pricks his conscience. Matthew says he loves me, that my deformity doesn't matter to him. I know he wants to marry me but I just want to be sure it isn't because he thinks he's under some kind of obligation or because he is sorry for me or because he feels guilty."

"I see. Well, in that case, there's nothing more to be said, is there?"

"I hope not," said Laura.

Farr turned off the road leading to Radlett, cycled slowly past the farmhouse and then dismounted to open the gate at the end of the muddy lane. He was hot and sweaty, the cut above his right eye was smarting and his calf muscles were lumps of iron. He wished he'd never borrowed the constable's bicycle; nine miles had seemed more like ninety on that old boneshaker. One of the tyres had had a slow puncture and he'd had to stop and pump

it up at frequent intervals, and to cap it all, the chain had come off twice.

Leaving the bicycle on the grass verge, he unlatched the gate and was about to swing it open when he heard sounds of movement near the oak trees away to his left.

"It's all right, sentry," he said in a loud voice, "it's only me – Major Farr."

"Good evening, sir."

The sentry's face was merely an indistinguishable blur at twenty yards but he thought he recognised the voice. "It's Hailwood, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good," said Farr. "You're just the man I want to see. Just hold this gate open and close it again behind me, would you?" Farr righted the bicycle and wheeled it through the gate. "You requested an interview, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"It would save time and spare you a lot of embarrassment if we discussed your problem now instead of tomorrow in front of the Sergeant Major."

"Yes, sir."

"You want to tell me about it then?" Farr said quietly.

"It's the wife."

He might have guessed it would be that. "Trouble at home – probably wants compassionate leave," the Sergeant Major had scrawled at the foot of Hailwood's letter.

"You see, sir, I used to be a charge hand at Rolls-Royce before I was conscripted and now she finds it hard to make ends meet on the allowances she gets from me and the Army."

Farr could never understand the machinations of the 'Derby' scheme for conscription. Hailwood was twenty-five years old, he had a wife and two children and was in a reserved occupation, yet the local board had seen fit to call him up for military service. He supposed they might have been influenced by the fact that the children were not Hailwood's, that he'd married a widow seven years older than himself only a few weeks before he was due to appear before the tribunal.

"So when she suggested taking in a lodger, I could hardly object, could I, sir?"

It was the same old story. One of the neighbours had written to Hailwood to inform him that his wife was getting a mite too friendly with the lodger and Hailwood had discovered it wasn't malicious gossip.

"You're asking for compassionate leave, is that it?"

"If I could just talk to her, sir, I know we can straighten things out."

Farr had heard that one too. Hailwood would throw the lodger out, there would be a reconciliation and he would return to camp all smiles, thinking everything was hunky-dory, whereas his wife would probably be lying flat on her back with a different man between her legs before he'd got off the train. If Hailwood were serving in France with the infantry, he would be told 'Hard luck' and be sent back up the line. But Hailwood wasn't in France and he wasn't an infantryman. If he refused to grant him compassionate leave, Hailwood would probably go AWOL and he would lose a good fitter.

"All right," said Farr, "you can have seventy-two hours and a free travel warrant."

"Thank you, sir."

"I just hope I'm doing the right thing."

"I won't let you down, sir."

"You'll be bloody sorry if you do," said Farr.

A cluster of searchlights began to probe the sky over Potter's Bar. The rays of light wavered uncertainly, then came together, and suddenly there was a mass of tiny orange-coloured flashes.

"Looks like Guy Fawkes night," Hailwood murmured.

"Lucky devil."

"Sir?"

"Not you," said Farr. "I was thinking about Mr Lethbridge. He's in the right place at the right time." And I'm not, he thought.

11

Lethbridge figured the Zeppelin was roughly five miles away. The airship looked no bigger than a pencil and it was difficult to tell in which direction it was heading. In the next two minutes he would know whether or not they were on a converging course, would know too which of them enjoyed the advantage of height over the other. With the throttle wide open, the BE had a top speed of sixty-five miles an hour but if the Zeppelin was an 'R' type, it could certainly match that. If it was the L72, the god-damned thing could out-run and out-climb him with ease.

It was, however, a waste of time considering the 'ifs' and 'buts'; they were simply problematic factors that might or might not have some relevance if ever he got round to holding a post-mortem. Right now, there was only one relevance, one certain factor. Sure as hell that Zeppelin commander wouldn't hang around below the cloud base, trapped in a cone of searchlights with every anti-aircraft gun in London firing at him, a minute longer than he had to.

Lethbridge took his eyes off the target and glanced upwards. The cloud formation had changed, the heavy overcast breaking up into smaller but very solid patches of recognisable cumulo-nimbus. The moon was still hidden but there was some ambient light from the stars. He could understand why the weather should be a favourite topic of conversation with the British; their climate was so damned unpredictable, it was small wonder they were always talking about it. Sometimes they had all four seasons in one day, he thought.

Concentrating on the Zeppelin again, he saw that the intruder was bigger now, about the size of a large cigar, and growing rapidly. An 'R' type, six-engine job, twisting

and weaving in a desperate effort to lose the searchlights and put the anti-aircraft gunners off their aim. The ship was climbing too, nose up at roughly five degrees from horizontal but, at the moment, it looked as if he had the advantage of height over the Hun. There wasn't a lot in it though; four, maybe five hundred feet, and the Zeppelin was beginning to present an oblique target. A stern chase then, the airship turning away from London over Potter's Bar to make for the east coast.

He could see the shells bursting in the sky ahead but the crump of each explosion was deadened by the ninety-horsepower engine. Down below, the muzzle flashes of the three-inch, quick-firing anti-aircraft guns reminded him of sheet lightning heralding a long drawn-out clap of thunder. A near miss rocked his plane and a strip of doped canvas flapped in the slipstream. He side-slipped, put the nose down and lost height. Reaching up, he grabbed hold of the pistol grip and pulled the Lewis gun towards him. Then he drew the bolt back, cocking the machine gun.

Lethbridge came in straight and level under the Zeppelin's stern, left hand on the stick, three fingers and thumb of the right hand clenching the butt of the pistol grip, index finger curled round the trigger taking up the slack. He closed his left eye, lined the leaf aperture rear sight and barleycorn foresight on the fat underbelly of the Zeppelin and squeezed the trigger, ripping off one long sustained burst of fire. Forty-seven rounds of incendiary bullets poured from the barrel, forty-seven spent cases spewed out of the ejector slot into the canvas hold-all.

Lethbridge shot past the nose and hauled back on the stick, almost standing the plane on its tail as he sought to gain altitude before making a second pass at the Zeppelin. Mr Brock and Mr Pomeroy were supposed to have produced a sure-fire winner with their tracer ammunition but, as far as he could see, the airship was unharmed. Still climbing, he twisted the drum magazine against the spring load and lifted it off the spindle. He put the empty magazine in the ammunition bin, took out a

fresh drum, clipped it on to the Lewis gun and cocked it again. He kicked the rudder over, made a sharp turn, and then pushed the stick forward.

A Maxim on the top gun platform above the airship's bows opened up on him at a range of close on a thousand yards, and another near miss by a three-inch anti-aircraft shell rocked the BE. Diving below the control car, he hosed the Zeppelin from bows to stern. The hull was barely a hundred feet above him and there was no way he could miss such a fat juicy target. He could see the tracer rounds stitching into the envelope, but again nothing happened. Then plane and Zeppelin parted company and he was climbing again.

"I don't believe it." Lethbridge shook his head. "I just don't believe it," he repeated incredulously.

Removing the empty drum, he tossed it overboard in disgust and reloaded with the third and last magazine. The stick as far back as it would go, he closed the throttle at the top of the loop and hung there upside down until the nose dropped, taking him into a steep dive. He pushed the stick forward to regain control, then gently hauled it back again. He opened the engine out and felt a bump under the tail from the backwash as he levelled out.

The Zeppelin was slightly to his left and making for a large patch of cumulo-nimbus. Closing on the intruder, Lethbridge noticed a red glow appear on the envelope above one of the midships gondolas. The glow began to spread outwards and upwards; then, suddenly, a number of flames spurted from the fabric. Veering away, he watched them coalesce and lick up the sides until the whole structure was engulfed in a gigantic pillar of fire. Trailing a red banner of flaming petrol and gas, the Zeppelin began to plunge, stern first, towards the ground 9000 feet below.

Sewell watched the Zeppelin's destruction from the roof of Air Defence Headquarters. An 'R' or one of the earlier 'P' types? No matter; they would know the answer soon enough when they examined the tangled remains of its burnt-out skeleton. The airship had been over Potter's

Bar when the searchlights had fastened on to it ten minutes ago. According to the sound locators it had then been heading due east, so they should find what was left of it somewhere between Waltham Abbey and Leyton.

"Makes a spectacular sight, doesn't it, Colonel?"

Lieutenant Dawlish, Sewell thought, recognising the soft, cultured voice behind him, one of the junior staff officers who manned the operations room in the basement. "What are you doing here, Dawlish?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be on duty?"

"I have the graveyard shift, Colonel – two till six." Dawlish smiled and came a little nearer. "The gunfire woke me so I thought I'd come up here and see the fun."

Sewell frowned. A funeral pyre in the sky – was that Dawlish's idea of fun? More than twenty men roasting in the fire was a spectacular sight, was it? Or did this debonair young man from the Royal Horse Guards merely see the flames and nothing else? Not that he was moved by their fate; he'd witnessed too many so-called spectacular events to feel any emotion whatever. The greenish-yellow fog of chlorine gas creeping towards the trenches held by the French 45th North African division at St Julien, north of Ypres, and the slaughter on the first day of the Somme had anaesthetised him long ago.

"There's nothing left now." Dawlish sounded disappointed, like a small boy for whom the firework display had ended all too soon.

"Never mind, it was fun while it lasted," Sewell said with heavy irony.

The guns had stopped firing the moment the Zeppelin had begun to burn; now the searchlights went out one by one, leaving only the ambient light thrown off by the stars. A truck swung into Whitehall from Trafalgar Square and motored down to Parliament Square. As it passed below them, Sewell saw that a three-inch quick-firing anti-aircraft gun was mounted on the back of the open lorry.

"I wonder where that's off to?" Dawlish mused.

"I think you'd better make it your business to find out." Sewell brushed past him and made for the stairwell at the

back of the building. "Ring the Gunners at the War Office and see if they know anything about it," he said, and went on down to the operations room in the basement.

A junior staff officer, two clerks, a telephonist, a despatch rider and three plotters were on duty in the ops room. The plotters belonged to the Women's Army Corps and were, in Sewell's opinion, a very definite asset. Their main task was to keep the floor-to-ceiling visual display map up to date, but they also made themselves useful in other ways – typing messages, compiling the air intelligence summary and providing him with endless cups of tea throughout the night. He noticed there was a fresh cup waiting for him on his desk and smiled appreciatively at the fair-haired young corporal in charge of the WAC detail.

The visual display map hadn't altered much in his absence, except that one of the cardboard Iron Crosses denoting a Zeppelin had been removed. Twelve raiders had set out for England but so far only nine had crossed the coast and penetrated inland. Excluding the raider that had just been accounted for, one Zeppelin had dropped a few bombs on Hull, one was thought to be approaching Birmingham, three had been heard southwest of Leicester and three more had been reported in the general area of Cambridge, Bedford and Luton.

"Three Zeppelins unaccounted for," he said, frowning.

"Yes, sir." The WAC corporal scanned the contact reports clipped to her millboard, then looked at the visual display map. Three Zeppelins might be unaccounted for but they hadn't been overlooked by her plotters. "They could have slipped through the net," she said thoughtfully. "The sound locators are not infallible."

"Yes."

"Or they might have been forced to turn back, sir."

Sewell nodded. That too was possible; the older Zeppelins of the 'P' type were vastly underpowered and were prone to engine failure. Two such incidents he could believe, but three was stretching it a bit far. He sat down behind his desk and stared at the clock on the wall near the visual display map, absentmindedly stirring his cup

of tea even though it hadn't been sugared.

"Midnight," he said, thinking that their vigil had really only just begun.

"The witching hour," the WAC corporal said dryly.

"There's nothing magical about tonight," said Sewell.

Gayer felt sick. Exactly forty-one minutes ago, he had seen an incandescent light in the sky through a break in the clouds. It had been a long way off, somewhere just north of London, but he'd known it was a Zeppelin in flames, had known too that it was almost certainly the L54. Of the airships in Wenke's group, only the L54 had been within striking distance of Southwold when the radio direction-finding stations at Borkum and Nordholtz had fixed their position. He would have felt bad enough had it been one of the Zeppelins from Alhorn but he'd lived cheek by jowl with the officers and men of the L54 and that made it far worse.

He had hoped the disaster would make Wenke appreciate the true gravity of their own situation, but predictably it hadn't made the slightest scrap of difference. Wenke was determined to bomb London, no matter what. So here they were, feeling their way up the Thames estuary, Ehrlich on the elevators, Fiesler at the helm, their reliefs manning the two Maxim machine guns in the control car. They were showing a shade under 10,000 feet on the altimeter, the L72 was no longer stabilised and he suspected the automatic gas valves were malfunctioning. Petty Officer Ratz was still unconscious and while Berger would do his best to look after the gas cells, he was not a sailmaker by trade.

"Herr Oberleutnant, a moment please."

His master's voice, and very formal too. He was obviously still in Wenke's bad books, Gayer thought as he moved to the chart table. "Yes, sir?" he said politely.

"Take a look at the chart," Wenke said curtly. "See if you can anticipate what I have in mind."

The North Sea and east coast of England had been replaced by a large-scale map of London and the Home Counties. From Dartford their projected course moved

inland towards Croydon, south of the river; then, five miles short of the town, it doubled back to approach Woolwich from the south.

Gayer said, "The British have three-inch anti-aircraft guns defending the Arsenal at Blackheath, Honor Oak and Woolwich itself. By feinting towards Croydon, we may deceive the ground defences."

"We shall deceive them," said Wenke. "We shall draw their fire, they will hear us move away but they won't hear us creep back on two engines."

The plan might work, Gayer thought, but it would eat up precious time and put them in even greater danger in the long run. There was also another factor Wenke appeared to have overlooked.

"Our second objective is Silvertown," he said slowly. "That's just across the river from Woolwich."

"I'm aware of that, Herr Oberleutnant."

"It's defended by 4.7 inch guns at West Ham. How do you propose to outsmart them?"

"By making another feint." Wenke borrowed Koch's pencil and projected a line from Woolwich to Canvey Island at the mouth of the Thames estuary. "The British will think we're going home, but they'll be wrong." Smiling, Wenke drew another line from Canvey Island, across Barking to Silvertown.

Farr took another bite out of the doorstep sandwich and chewed it slowly. The two slices of bread, each half an inch thick, had been thinly spread with margarine, and the soya link sausage the duty cook had slapped between them tasted like sawdust, but he was only vaguely aware of it. The mug of tea in his left hand resembled brown Windsor soup and was sickly sweet but, again, he was scarcely conscious of it.

"Lethbridge is certainly cutting it a bit fine," Moorhouse said casually.

Farr grunted. Moorhouse didn't need to draw his attention to that. He'd merely to glance at the patrol programme to see that Yarborough and Sergeant Collins had taken off at fifteen minutes past midnight, and Frank

should have returned before then.

"The Zeppelin was downed at 2350 hours," Moorhouse said, reading from the log.

"Yes, I know. I saw it burning in the sky." Farr set his mug of tea down on the table. There had been no hint of malice in his voice, but he knew Moorhouse was trying to needle him. "Maybe Lethbridge shot it down, maybe he didn't," Farr said icily. "Personally, I hope he did, but that's by the way. The point is Lethbridge still had an hour's fuel left in the tank when the Zeppelin went down. Right?"

"Yes." Moorhouse stroked his neat black moustache. "I suppose one shouldn't write him off just yet."

"Damned right," said Farr. He reached for his mug of tea, then froze, one finger crooked through the enamel handle. Was that Lethbridge he could hear in the distance?

"That'll be the Crossley tender returning from Elstree," Moorhouse said, answering the unspoken question.

It figured. He'd sent the truck off with two men to guard his damaged plane and return the constable's bicycle shortly after he'd arrived back at Saxon's Farm and the driver had been gone an hour now.

"I can hear the propshaft whining," Moorhouse added for good measure.

Farr thought he sounded relieved that it wasn't Lethbridge and wondered why. Frank had done nothing to upset him; he hadn't taken his plane up on a test flight and thrown it about the sky to prove, in front of the whole squadron, that it was in tip-top condition. Then suddenly it dawned on him the reason why Moorhouse might be glad the American was overdue.

"Are you hoping there's a chance I'll ground your plane?" he asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

"What?" Moorhouse stared at him, mouth slightly open, eyes furtive and sliding away.

"One BE forced down with engine failure could be written off as bad luck, but not two in quick succession. That would be enough to make any squadron com-

mander think long and hard before sending one of his pilots out on patrol in a similar machine. And he'd do more than think long and hard if that particular pilot had told him earlier that his engine had cut out on him twice."

"You do me a great injustice." Moorhouse swallowed. "No such thought entered my mind."

"I'm glad to hear it," Farr said tersely.

"I know there's nothing wrong with my BE, sir."

"Nor with Frank's either, it would seem," Farr said, pointing skywards.

A few minutes later, Lethbridge came in over the oak trees and set his plane down on the runway. The engine died on him, sucking the tank dry, before he'd taxied halfway to the dispersal area.

12

Gayer pinched his eyes, then stared through the window. They were down to 9000 heading due north and flying straight and level on two engines. The moon was no longer obscured, and directly ahead he could see Woolwich Common and the loop in the river at Gallions Reach. The feint seemed to be working; the guns were silent and there were no searchlights probing the sky, but a hornet's nest was waiting for them at Blackheath, Honor Oak and Woolwich, and the knowledge made him sweat.

"It's all yours, Friedrich." Wenke's voice seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness of the control car.

Gayer nodded. Wenke was being all sweetness and light again, endeavouring to put him at his ease. He checked the reading on the altimeter a second time, wiped his sweaty palms on his bridge coat and then set the bomb sight for 9000 feet. He glanced at the air speed indicator, saw that it was registering twenty miles per hour and dipped into his coat pocket for the stopwatch.

In the foreground about a mile ahead, he could see a large building surrounded by a dry moat and beyond it, a road stretching across their front from left to right.

"We're approaching Eltham Palace, navigator," he said, his voice a harsh croak. "I'll use that as the initial reference point, then the road due north."

"Got it," said Koch.

Gayer peered through the bomb sight, stopwatch at the ready in his left hand. Eltham Palace appeared in the crosswires and he pressed the stopwatch, then pressed it again over the lateral road. "Forty-four seconds, navigator," he said, reading off the luminous figures. "What's the separation distance?"

"Five hundred and forty yards," said Koch.

Forty-four seconds to cover 540 yards; what did that represent in terms of speed over the ground? Gayer closed his eyes and did a quick piece of mental arithmetic. "I make it twenty-five miles an hour," he said a few moments later.

"Confirmed," said Koch. "We must have a favourable tail wind."

Gayer adjusted the Zeiss bomb sight to reflect their speed over the ground, then added a compensatory curve for the ballistic trajectory of the 110-pounders. He wiped his hands again and peered through the bomb sight. Woolwich Common and the Royal Military College were well to the left of the crosswires and they were drifting off the line.

"Slightly left, helmsman," he said quietly.

Fiesler turned the wheel, and the chains clanked through the ratchet; another lateral road appeared in the crosswires, then the Royal Artillery barracks.

"Steady, steady." Gayer moistened his lips. "Hold it at that, helmsman."

No reaction from the ground yet and the Arsenal in sight, gradually slipping into the crosswires. Not long now, Gayer thought, and started counting to himself. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one; he tripped the switches with his right hand as they passed over the target.

Fourteen bombs left the racks, two at a time, fell to the ground and detonated. As he watched, Gayer was certain that for a split second he could see the shockwave produced by each explosion.

"On target." His voice rose hoarsely. "They're on target."

Wenke said, "Hard right, Helmsman," and rang the telegraph for full ahead all engines.

The bows heeled to starboard pointing towards Plumstead Marshes; Ehrlich trimmed the horizontal elevator planes and the nose lifted. Gayer pulled three toggles, emptying 6000 pounds of water from the ballast sacks to speed their ascent. A searchlight near Blackheath switched on and swept across the sky, cleaved towards them, then veered away. A solitary gun opened up, loosing off three rounds before the clouds enveloped them.

"We caught them napping," Gayer shouted triumphantly. "By God, we caught them napping."

"We must hope we are equally successful next time," Wenke observed quietly.

Gayer nodded, still smiling. Then the implication sank in and his elation died as swiftly as it had been born.

Lethbridge felt as high as a kite even though he'd scarcely touched a drop of the whisky Farr had poured into his enamel mug. It was the same with the other pilots who'd crawled out of bed to join the celebration; Broadhurst, Allchurch and Sergeant Newton were just as elated. Even Moorhouse was smiling.

"I was lucky," he said for the fourth time in as many minutes, "dead lucky. I mean, it beats me why the commander didn't empty every ballast sack in the Zeppelin instead of just relying on his elevators to gain height."

"Perhaps he'd already shed all the ballast they were carrying," Allchurch suggested.

"Could be." Lethbridge smiled happily. "It sure as hell wasn't raining cats and dogs when I went in under his belly."

"How effective was their machine-gun fire?" Broadhurst asked judiciously.

"Their aim was lousy, George. I doubt they could have hit a barn door at ten paces."

"What about our 'Archies'?" Newton demanded. "Did they hold off when you went in?"

"Nope," said Lethbridge. "I guess they didn't know I was around."

"Wouldn't have made any difference if they had," Newton said with feeling. Anti-aircraft gunners were not his favourite kind of people. His hostility towards them was understandable; on more than one occasion he'd brought his FE home, the wings riddled with shell splinters. "I bet you've got a few holes to show for it."

"I wouldn't know. Why don't you ask those guys?" Lethbridge said, pointing towards Sergeant Major Bennett and Corporal Wilson who'd just entered the marquee. "They're the experts."

"How about it, Tubby?" Newton said. "What's Mr Lethbridge got, a plane or a sieve?"

Wilson said, "The gunners must be slipping; I could only find two holes. The riggers'll fix those in no time."

"Give the man a big cigar." Lethbridge produced a Havana from his top pocket and passed it to him via Allchurch. "How about you, Sergeant Major?"

"No thank you, sir," Bennett said. "I gave up smoking some time ago."

Bennett was ex-Grenadier Guards, six foot three, ramrod straight and thin as a lath. His lungs had been affected by the chlorine gas he'd inhaled at Gommecourt and some mornings he woke up coughing blood.

Farr said, "You'll have a drink though, won't you, Sergeant Major?"

"I wouldn't say no."

"We don't seem to have any spare mugs. Do you mind taking it straight from the bottle?"

"Whisky's whisky," Bennett said, raising the bottle in a salute. "Here's to the next one, Mr Lethbridge."

"I'll drink to that." Moorhouse raised his mug, then sidled up close to Lethbridge. "We were getting rather worried about you, Frank," he said with an appropriate note of concern in his voice.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Alan. So was I." Lethbridge blew a smoke ring towards the roof. "You see, I had this drum of ammunition left and there was plenty of gas in the tank, so I thought, why not stick around; maybe you'll get lucky a second time. Next thing I know the engine's wheezing like it had asthma."

"I can imagine how you must have felt. Same thing happened to me over Bapaume in '15. I'd just shot down an Albatross when I saw this two-seater Aviatik streaking for home."

Moorhouse droned on, his voice never modulating. Lethbridge nodded in all the right places and found himself wishing Charlotte were there to rescue him. He had gone out of his way to conceal her from Farr and the rest of the squadron but now, suddenly and inexplicably, he wanted them to meet Charlotte. And why stop at Saxon's Farm? Why not introduce Charlotte to New York? To his friends back home? To his family? Lethbridge smiled at the thought, reckoning it was easily the best idea he'd had in months, even years.

"It was no joke, I can tell you," Moorhouse said in a peevish voice.

"What?"

"Having to put down in No Man's Land."

Lethbridge frowned. He could either explain to Moorhouse that his attention had been elsewhere, which would probably offend the Englishman even more, or else he could eat humble pie. "No, I guess it wasn't, Alan," he said contritely.

"It was pretty tricky for a while. There were moments when I didn't think I was going to make it back to our trenches in one piece."

"Lucky for us you did, Alan." Lethbridge clapped him on the shoulder. "Good pilots are hard to come by."

Charlotte would have to do some introducing too, starting with her two sons. What were their names? Jamie and Martin?

"It was shortly after that little incident that I had my dog fight with Max Immelmann."

"Yeah?" Lethbridge tried to look suitably impressed.

So Charlotte was going to introduce him to Jamie and Martin, was she? And just how was she going to accomplish that if he were suddenly posted to a squadron in France? Lethbridge eyed the out-tray on the table a few feet away. His application was still there under Farr's letter and begging to be removed. Slowly and very stealthily, he began to sidestep his way round Moorhouse towards the table. He still had some way to go, when a plane passed low overhead, its engine misfiring badly.

There was a tense hush. Then Allchurch said, "That can only be Yarborough. I bet Sergeant Jarvis is saying three Hail Marys right this minute."

Farr listened. A 120-horsepower Austro Daimler? Like hell; that was Collins in a BE and he was in trouble. "What are you waiting for?" he snapped. "Get the bloody runway lit."

They went out fast, Farr in the lead, Broadhurst, Newton, Allchurch and the others close behind him. Lethbridge hung back just long enough to grab his application from the tray. But no one heard the distant throb of an approaching Zeppelin above the noise made by the BE.

Kapitanleutnant Neurath glanced at the slip of paper which his navigator had just passed to him and then crumpled it in his fist. The fact that they were now on course at last and passing over St Albans in no way altered his opinion that his airship should have been consigned to the scrap heap long ago. One of the oldest 'P' type Zeppelins still on active operations, its motive power was supplied by four six-cylinder 210-horsepower Maybach engines that were the bane of his life. Neurath had lost count of the number of breakdowns he'd had since the L4 was commissioned in April 1915, but this was the first time he'd had two power failures during the course of one raid. Four hours out from Alhorn, the single Maybach in the control car had started to run a hot bearing; then shortly after crossing the English coast at Great Yarmouth, the chief engineer had reported that the starboard engine in the rear gondola was only firing on four cylinders. The sparking plugs had been removed,

cleaned and replaced, but within an hour they'd oiled up again.

There had been another and far more serious problem that he'd had to contend with. An electrical fault on the wireless generator had affected the magnetic compass and, as a result, they had wandered all over the place. Heading inland, they had passed over Cambridge, then veered off to Bedford before the navigator discovered and corrected the error. He had been ordered to attack the government buildings in Whitehall, but they were way behind schedule. The revised estimate for their time over the target was now 0115 hours and that, Neurath thought, was far too late for comfort.

"I don't like it, Thadden," he said aloud.

"No, sir." Thadden glanced at the ASI and bit his lip. Given their present speed, there was a good chance that dawn would find them off the English coast within range of the British fighter planes if they pressed on to London. In the circumstances, it would be only sensible to look for an alternative target, but he lacked the nerve to suggest that in so many words. "We passed St Albans a few minutes ago," he said tentatively.

"What of it?"

"Well, it's a fairly important centre of communications."

Neurath smiled. Thadden was exaggerating its potential as a military installation but St Albans was on the main railway line to the North Midlands and they were unlikely to find a more worthwhile target in the near vicinity. There were twenty 110-pounders and four heavies in the racks and anything was preferable to jettisoning their bomb load over open fields.

But Neurath still hesitated. Bombing the railway at St Albans was a soft option and a really determined commander would do his utmost to attack the primary target. As he brooded on it, a number of flickering lights suddenly appeared on the ground just ahead.

"What do you make of that?" he asked excitedly.

"I'm not sure," Thadden said. "Do you suppose it might be an airfield?"

"I know it is," Neurath crowed, "a primary target if ever I saw one. Let's give them something to remember us by."

"Yes, sir."

"Eight 110-pounders should liven them up a bit." Neurath rubbed his hands together and beamed happily. "We'll save the rest for the railway."

There was no time to calculate their speed over the ground or add the necessary compensatory curve for the ballistic trajectory. Thadden merely set the bomb sight for the correct altitude, waited for the lights to appear in the crosswires, and then tripped four release switches in quick succession.

Sergeant Collins reached the end of the runway and taxied slowly towards the dispersal area. Farr thought his engine sounded like a banshee the way it was screaming, then suddenly realised the noise was coming from another source. The same notion occurred to Broadhurst and the other pilots on the opposite side of the field near the fitters' marquee and he saw them throw themselves flat. Only Lethbridge, standing a few paces away, failed to react immediately and, launching himself at the American, Farr brought him down in a flying tackle.

Farr heard the first bomb explode somewhere near the farmhouse and a split second later saw a blinding flash of light as the second bomb detonated in the middle of the runway. The ground seemed to heave and quake beneath him and the blast wave, travelling outwards, was a hurricane force wind that stripped the bare trees of their branches. A column of earth fountained into the air and fell back, scattering the soil over a wide area. Other geysers erupted in the next field but each successive explosion seemed fainter until finally they ceased altogether. His ears still ringing, Farr slowly got to his feet and looked about him.

The farmhouse had ceased to exist. The squadron office and six bell tents had vanished and the fitters' marquee had ended up in the next field. There was a large crater in the centre of the runway and two FEs were

locked together in a loving embrace.

"Jesus," Lethbridge said in a voice that sounded a long way off. "Jesus," he repeated, "did you ever see such a mess?"

Farr said, "We'd better muster the squadron and check who's missing. Then we'll have to get that crater filled in before Yarborough returns from patrol."

"How long have we got?"

"Less than ninety minutes."

"We'll never do it."

"If the worst comes to the worst, we can always lay another runway diagonally across the field." Farr glanced to his right and saw a BE upside down halfway between the existing runway and the dispersal area. Collins, he thought, and started running.

He had covered less than thirty yards when the petrol leaking from the tank on to the red hot exhaust manifold finally ignited and engulfed the plane in flames.

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Charlotte Ingold stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray, then rearranged the blanket across her knees, tucking the ends under her legs and feet. Although the 'All Clear' had sounded some time ago, she had decided to spend the rest of the night in the armchair, being too wide awake to go back to bed. What was it Frank had said to her? – "St Albans is even safer than Bordon; there's not a darned thing here that's worth bombing." And of course she had believed him and stayed in bed when a police constable had cycled along Broad Street blowing his whistle loud enough to wake the dead. All the other guests staying at the hotel had obediently trooped down to the cellar but, closing her ears to the manager's pleas,

she had snuggled under the bedclothes, convinced it was a false alarm. Barely ten minutes later she knew different when a series of brilliant white flashes had illuminated the night sky and the crump of one explosion after another had rattled the sash windows in her bedroom.

So much for Frank's words of comfort, Charlotte thought, and stared at the rumpled double bed. It seemed longer, much longer now, than a few short hours since they had lain there entwined in each other's arms. "I love you, love you, love you," he'd said. But did he really mean it? Frank was so very different from Simon. He was headstrong, impetuous, amusing, dynamic, and far more gallant. He paid her fulsome compliments, gave her small thoughtful gifts and knew just how to make her feel that she was the most important person in his life. Yet although Simon had never been particularly demonstrative, Charlotte knew that he'd loved her in his own rather quiet way and while their life together might have been somewhat dull and unromantic, there had been a feeling of security and contentment. And then her serenity had been shattered, turning to grief and sorrow with a telegram delivered by a fourteen-year-old boy on a post-office bicycle.

Maybe she had been attracted to Frank because physically he reminded her of Simon? Of course Frank was fair where Simon was dark, but they looked alike, same nose, same colour eyes, and same kind of mouth. They could be brothers; she'd thought that first time they'd met when Frank had arrived with a crowd of young officers from Bordon for tea one Sunday afternoon.

"I love you, love you, love you," Frank had said with every thrust of his body into hers and she had answered, "Yes, yes, yes." Meaning what? That she relished the things he did to her, that he filled a large lonely gap in her life, that she needed him? Well, Frank certainly aroused her more than Simon ever had and in a way that both gratified and shocked her at one and the same time. But there was more to their relationship than mere sensual pleasure; at least, there was as far as she was concerned. Frank occupied her thoughts every waking minute and

there was nothing, absolutely nothing she wouldn't do for him.

But there was not the same wholehearted commitment from Frank, nor would there ever be. Charlotte supposed she'd always known that but had refused to recognise it until the message had finally sunk in this afternoon. It wasn't anything Frank had said, just the way he'd quickly changed the subject when she'd suggested he should introduce her to Matthew Farr sometime. "You're just a convenient plaything, my girl," she'd told herself, "a little bit of home comfort to be kept in the background, hidden away." And why should he feel otherwise? She was seven years older, for God's sake, and had two sons.

"End it," Charlotte said aloud, "end it now before he discards you and before you are really hurt."

Why not leave tomorrow, first thing after breakfast? There was enough money in her purse for the train fare and she could pay the hotel bill by cheque. She would need to warn the servants that she was coming home but a telegram to Mrs Lindsay, the housekeeper, from the post office on her way to the station would solve that little problem. She would stop over in London, have lunch, cash a cheque at Cox's and King's and perhaps do a little shopping. That would give the servants plenty of time for her arrival late in the afternoon. She would explain everything to Frank in a letter and leave it at the desk. But first things first.

Charlotte threw the blanket aside and stood up. Placing the dressing table stool in front of the wardrobe, she stepped on to it and lifted her suitcase and hatbox down. Then she began to pack, a lump in her throat, her eyes pricking.

Farr held a small torch over his notebook and stared at the entries: three dead, five wounded and two missing. The wounded had been loaded into the Crossley tender and sent off to the General Hospital in St Albans. The missing were probably buried in the ruins of the farmhouse and the dead lay at his feet, their bodies covered by a tent wall. No more marital problems for Private Hail-

wood, gutted by a bomb splinter as he patrolled the field guarding His Majesty's property; no more flying for Sergeant Collins, trapped upside down in his BE and burnt to a crisp; and no more secret nightmares for Lieutenant Moorhouse, killed by the blast of a 110-pound bomb while manning the telephone.

Farr closed the notebook, shoved it into his pocket and slowly turned about to face the runway. He wasn't needed there; Broadhurst had everything under control, overseeing the team of fifty NCOs and men detailed to fill in the crater. Better see how Frank is making out, he thought, and moved off towards the farmhouse.

He'd always understood that farmers were not keen on gardening, but Mrs Shilton had tended theirs with loving care. This morning on his way to breakfast he'd noticed the flowerbeds on either side of the front path had been a mass of snowdrops, hyacinths and crocuses. The daffodils and primroses under the hedge bordering the lane had begun to show too, but now everything was buried under a mountain of rubble that had spilled across the lawn. Skirting the fallen masonry, he walked round to the left side of the house where Lethbridge and a group of airmen were tunnelling into the ruins.

"How's it going, Frank?" he asked, his face grim.

Lethbridge stepped to one side of the entrance hole and trained his flashlight into the shaft. "The kitchen's this end," he said tersely. "So far, we've gotten past the cooking range. In another ten, maybe twelve feet, we may come across Davies. At least, that's the betting amongst the guys."

Davies was the officers' mess cook whom Broadhurst had installed in the farmhouse. Davies was supposed to sleep in the lines but Farr knew that he often dossed down on the couch near the back stairs.

"There's a small bedroom directly behind the kitchen," Lethbridge continued. "They tell me one of the Land Army girls sleeps there."

Farr knew that the Shiltons, mother, father, son and eleven-year-old daughter occupied three bedrooms on the top floor. He assumed the second Land Army girl had

the fourth. "That shaft doesn't look very safe to me, Frank. Shouldn't you shore it up before there's a cave-in?"

"The guy up front knows what he's doing; he used to be a coal miner. We've got an ex-steeplejack working with Sergeant Newton at the other end of the building. My coal miner says the guys on top don't need anyone with special skills."

True enough, Farr thought, looking up at the gang of men on top of the mound. All they had to do was pick up the manageable bits of debris with their bare hands and toss them into the yard behind them, making another pile of bricks and shattered timber in the process.

"Do you think anybody's still alive under this little lot?" Lethbridge asked him quietly.

"It's possible." Farr lit two cigarettes and gave one to the American.

"I don't see how they can have survived with all this stuff on top of them."

"You'd be surprised how good their chances are, Frank. A table, a bed or a fallen beam could be holding the weight off them. And there are always pockets of air."

"Yeah?" Lethbridge sounded doubtful.

"They dug Laura out of the Base hospital alive," Farr said. An Army-issue bed had saved her. Laura had heard the bomb coming and had rolled out of bed and under it in one sinuous motion. One end of the bed had collapsed under the pressure, slicing into her right foot, but the rest had held up.

"Laura?" Lethbridge said questioningly.

"A girl I know." Farr stared at the burning ember of his cigarette. "I'm going to marry her."

"Well, congratulations."

"You can be the Best Man." Farr pinched his eyes. Their conversation was becoming farcical. There were six, perhaps eight people buried in the ruins of the farmhouse and here he was prattling on about a wedding that might never happen. "Do you need any extra hands, Frank?" he asked wearily.

"You got any to spare?"

"Not really, but if you need them, I can rob the line party. They're only wasting their time anyway. Even if they do find the break in the assault cable and repair it, we haven't got a telephone to hook on to the line until somebody finds the damned thing."

No doubt Air Defence Headquarters was wondering why they hadn't received any after-action reports from the squadron and why they couldn't get through to them, but they'd just have to wait. He'd done the best he could by sending Allchurch off with the wounded with instructions to phone in from St Albans and let them know what had happened at Saxon's Farm.

Lethbridge said, "I think we can manage okay. How's George making out?"

"No bunch of road menders ever worked harder." Farr dropped his cigarette on to the ground and trod on it. "Funny thing about a bomb; it blows a great big hole in the ground and scatters tons of earth about all over the place, yet when you try to collect it all up again, there's never enough to fill the crater it made. Broadhurst has got them digging sods out of the next field to make up the deficiency."

"Maybe you should give George those extra men?"

"No point," said Farr. "We've run out of picks and shovels."

A voice behind them said, "I think Fred's found somebody, Mr Lethbridge."

"Alive or dead?" Lethbridge asked.

Nobody answered him. The men round the entrance were too busy reaching into the shaft, and the coal miner deep below couldn't hear him. The minutes ticked away; then the men around the entrance backed off carrying the body of a young woman in a blood-stained nightdress between them.

"That's poor old Millie," said the same voice. "It's a wonder Fred didn't find Craddock, the mess waiter, on top of her."

Somebody laughed nervously; Farr swore under his breath, wrote the dead girl's name in his notebook and then walked away.

Gayer picked up the three parachutes and dropped them one by one into the keel seventy-eight feet below. This was the second time he'd visited the top platform and he wasn't going to climb the ladder a third time to make sure the machine gunners were still with them if he could help it. Turning about, he climbed down the ladder, his bowels as usual feeling as though they were hanging between his legs. The vertigo sensation vanished the moment his feet touched bottom and, turning about again, he walked towards the stern, checking the gas cells on either side as he went.

"How's Petty Officer Ratz doing?" he asked, coming up to Berger.

Ratz answered for himself. "I'm feeling a little groggy, Herr Oberleutnant, but otherwise I'm okay."

"You amaze me," said Gayer. "I thought I'd find you still unconscious."

"He came round half an hour ago, sir," Berger said, as though he were personally responsible for the patient's recovery.

"Remarkable," Gayer said, "quite remarkable. You must have the constitution of an ox." Crap, absolute crap. Ratz looked terrible; the crude bandage around his head was one large bloodstain, his face white and drawn, his cheeks sunken. His eyes didn't seem to be focusing properly either; a spot of double vision there, Gayer thought. He trained his flashlight on the adjoining hammock and saw a mound buried under a pile of blankets. "Who's that?" he demanded. "Hassell?"

"No, sir, it's Vermehren," said Berger.

Gayer nodded. Hassell and Olbricht would be manning the port and starboard Maxim guns in the rear engine gondola. "Wake him up," he said curtly. "I want Vermehren up forrard in the bows with a can of dope."

"I'll go," Ratz said. "Vermehren couldn't patch a gas cell to save his life."

"You stay where you are. Molders would have a thing or two to say if you had a relapse."

"Maybe that's the best thing that could happen to me," Ratz said in a dull and subdued voice.

"Rubbish," Gayer said firmly. "That piece of flying metal must have scrambled your brains. You aren't thinking straight." But he was. Lehr would be waiting for him if or when they returned to Nordholtz, and in due course Ratz would be charged with treason, tried by court martial, convicted, sentenced and executed in order that the Naval Air Division could say their Zeppelins were perfectly safe.

"Can you tell us what's happening, Herr Oberleutnant?" Berger asked diffidently. "A little while back, we heard the engines shut down one at a time and now it feels like we're drifting."

"That's exactly what we are doing," Gayer told him.

They had crossed the Plumstead Marshes and proceeded due east, passing over Dartford and Gravesend. Wenke had ordered the engines to be shut down one at a time in order to deceive the sound locators. Changing course beyond Gravesend, they'd headed north-northeast until they were abreast of Canvey Island on the north side of the Thames estuary when they had come about on one engine. Then Wenke had shut down completely.

"The British will think we've gone home," Gayer continued. "At least, that's the general idea and it seems to be working." He glanced at his wristwatch. "In another ten minutes from now, we'll re-start the outer engines in the rear gondola and creep up on our next objective."

"That's brilliant," Ratz said, and meant it.

Brilliant? Gayer supposed it was, and if by chance they did live to see the Fatherland again, then no doubt the Kaiser would present Wenke with the Pour le Mérite and that would make everybody happy. Certainly that blue enamel star with alternating gold filigree eagles would do wonders for the Kapitanleutnant's future career in the Navy. Konteradmiral? Maybe even higher. Not bad for the son of a sub-postmaster in Bremen.

Berger said, "What are our chances, sir?"

"Excellent," Gayer said automatically. "In fact, better than excellent if that's possible." He glared at the lumpy figure in the adjoining hammock. "I thought I told you to wake Vermehren?"

"I've been shaking him all the time, Herr Oberleutnant, but it doesn't seem to have any effect."

"Try undoing one of the ends, Berger. That should liven him up."

Gayer turned away and moved off towards the bows. Acting on a hunch, he stopped at the mid-point and swung round, training his flashlight aft to illuminate Ratz, dope can in hand. He smiled, thinking wryly that if Wenke were to receive the Pour le Mérite, men like Ratz and Molders would have earned it for him.

Broadhurst heard the distant sound of a plane and instinctively craned his neck to look upward at the night sky, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown. "That could be Yarborough," he muttered.

"Very likely, George; he's about due." Farr broke open his Very pistol and loaded it with a red signal cartridge.

"I wish to God we could have repaired the original runway in time. This new one's a bit tricky for the likes of Yarborough."

"We've given him all the elbow room we can, George."

"But will he catch on?"

"Yarborough may be a lousy pilot," said Farr, "but he's not daft. The new runway must be visible miles away."

They had salvaged what oil lamps they could and lit a double row of small bonfires on a diagonal axis from the farmhouse through the former site of the squadron office to the far right hand corner of the field. A burning arrow on the ground indicated the direction in which Yarborough should land. Provided he recognised and appreciated its significance, he would come in over the farmhouse and touch down around the mid-point. The new runway was, if anything, marginally longer than the original, but there was one hazard, a tall elm tree in the far right hand corner of the field.

"I'm not very happy about it," Broadhurst said gloomily.

"Our choice was strictly limited, George," Farr said, controlling his exasperation with difficulty. "There are six bomb craters in the adjoining fields due south, four

damned big oak trees immediately east of here and the fields north and west are boxed in with hedges and are a darned sight too small. Of course, we could have laid out a parallel runway, but you know what Yarborough's like; he comes in veering from side to side. He'd find that partially-filled crater as sure as God made little green apples."

"Yes, you're right." Broadhurst loaded his Very pistol with a red signal cartridge. "Well, here goes," he said, moving off. "Keep your fingers crossed."

"You know what to do, George?"

"Yes," said Broadhurst. "I stand fifty yards down from the arrow. If I think Yarborough is coming in too high, I put up a red flare."

Farr nodded. Yarborough wouldn't be looking over his shoulder but he would put up a second flare in front of him. "You'd better tell Frank to pull his men back from the farmhouse. Yarborough might see them and take evasive action and we don't want him overshooting the field."

Stopping the rescue teams for ten minutes or so was unlikely to make a scrap of difference. So far, they had dug out five bodies: Millie Robinson, Davies, Craddock and the Shiltons, both Mr and Mrs. Edna Asher, the other Land Army girl, and the Shiltons' son and eleven-year-old daughter were still unaccounted for but Farr now thought it probable that they too were dead. The strong kitchen table hadn't saved Davies and the shattered beams hadn't protected Millie Robinson. The only thing to be said in favour of the roof rafters was that they'd snapped like matchwood, providing a ready supply of much-needed fuel for the bonfires lighting the runway.

The FE drew steadily nearer, then roared over the field at an altitude of roughly 200 feet. Farr noted approvingly that Yarborough was taking a good look at the new approach before he came in to land.

Yarborough went round. Some sort of disaster had obviously occurred at Saxon's Farm in his absence. Not only were the runway lights on a north-east–south-west

axis instead of east to west, but the farmhouse appeared to have been demolished. He tried to visualise the new approach and the sort of hazards he might encounter. If memory served him right, the diagonal runway would lead him towards the fitters' marquee and the dispersal area, beyond which there was a tall elm tree. Well, here goes, he thought, and came in over the farmhouse, rapidly losing height.

Something popped in the sky behind him, then, immediately to his front, he saw a red flare soar into the air. Reacting swiftly, he opened the throttle and hauled back on the stick, clearing the obstruction at the end of the runway by a mere ten feet. Mouth dry as dust, his heart thumping, he completed another circuit of the field, lined up his plane and came in again.

Two red Very lights warned him off as he passed over the farmhouse and, obeying the signal, he shied away and gained height, mouthing obscenities. Those stupid idiots on the ground didn't seem to realise that his tank was practically bone dry and Sergeant Jarvis sitting there in front of him behind the Vickers machine gun was no bloody help at all. The least Jarvis could do was look over the side and indicate their height off the ground but, oh, dear me, no, Jarvis was too busy counting his rosary beads and saying Hail Marys to think of a simple thing like that. Yarborough wished he were in the German Air Force, then he could gain height and bale out with Jarvis, but he was in the RFC and they didn't believe in issuing their pilots with parachutes. It wasn't the done thing, you know; might encourage a windy chap to take the easy way out when he got into a dogfight with the Huns.

Grim-faced, Yarborough swooped over the farmhouse and put the nose down. Two red flares greeted him but he ignored them and went on in. The FE hit the ground, lifted off, and hit the ground again, hopping like a kangaroo. Suddenly Yarborough knew he wasn't going to stop in time and he opened the throttle in a last desperate attempt to avoid the obstruction in front of him.

The FE was doing close on thirty miles an hour when it struck the elm tree head on. The observer's cockpit dis-

integrated, killing Jarvis instantly; then the 160 horsepower Austro Daimler engine behind Yarborough broke loose and slammed into him, crushing his spine.

14

Gayer bit his lip. Barking Creek lay well astern of them now and he could see the Royal Victoria Docks and immediately to the left near the river, the sheds of the ammunition factory at Silvertown. So far, all was quiet; so far, there had been no reaction from the ground, but he wondered how much longer that would last. The cumulo-nimbus clouds had dispersed, forming large patches of altostratus, some obviously denser than others, and there was too much moonlight for his liking. There were twenty-six 110-pounders still left in the racks but they were down to their last four ballast sacks and while that would be enough to see them through this attack, Wenke was planning to save ten HE bombs for the centre of London.

It was Gayer's opinion that they should forget Whitehall, drop the lot in one go and run for home. First light was just three hours away and it would be suicide to press on, but he knew Wenke would never admit to that.

"We're approaching the target now, Friedrich."

Gayer nodded. Wenke was still very friendly, seemingly unaware of his hostility.

"Don't leave it too late," Wenke cautioned.

"No, sir."

Gayer checked to make sure that he'd set the Zeiss bomb sight for the correct altitude and compensatory curve, then bent over the crosswires. The nearest anti-aircraft guns were the four point sevens at West Ham, but you never knew with the British. They had mobile guns

and you could suddenly find yourself encountering a heavy barrage when you least expected it.

A cluster of searchlights flicked on and wandered spastically; then, suddenly the sky ahead was full of bursting shells. They're firing blind, Gayer told himself, hoping to deter us. But his right hand trembled above the release switches and he threw them in quick succession, not caring that most of the bombs were going to miss the factory because he'd failed to correct the drift.

"Bombs away," he shouted.

Wenke said, "Hard right, Helmsman," and then rang full ahead all engines as Gayer emptied the last four ballast sacks.

A beam found them and within a matter of seconds they were trapped in a vortex of searchlights. The barrage intensified, shells bursting above, below, behind and in front of them as they struggled to gain height.

"They must have some mobile guns down there," Wenke said coolly.

"Yes, sir." Gayer was conscious that his voice was little more than a croak and made a determined effort to speak clearly. "I must say they're giving us a pretty warm reception."

"And wasting a lot of ammunition in the process."

Like hell, Gayer thought, but of course Wenke had merely said that to raise their morale. It seemed to have the desired effect too, at least with Ehrlich and Fiesler; they appeared unmoved by the hail of fire directed at their ship. An apt description that because no matter how fast Fiesler spun the helm on Wenke's order, the Zeppelin responded with all the sluggishness of an ancient tramp steamer.

"We should give those gunners a vote of thanks," Wenke said.

"Oh? Why's that?" Gayer asked faintly.

"Because no British fighter pilot in his right mind is going to fly into this muck."

Gayer stared at the altimeter and wished the needle would move a little faster. Their hull was painted black and much good the camouflage was doing them because

no matter how Wenke twisted and turned, the searchlights held them in a vice-like grip. Too slow, too big and lousy manoeuvrability, that was the basic trouble with the L72. He closed his eyes and prayed hard. When he opened them again they were in the altostratus, immune from the preying eyes on the ground.

"Somebody up there must have been listening to me," he said, then hastily looked the other way, conscious that Wenke was staring at him as if he'd taken leave of his senses.

The guns were still firing, guided by the sound locations, but the barrage was less intense now. They went on up past 10,000, gained another 500 feet, and levelled out. Still weaving to confuse the ground defences, Wenke reduced speed and began to shut down the engines. Gradually, like the passing of a thunderstorm, the gunfire died away. Then, just when it seemed they were safe, a parting shot exploded under the rear engine gondola.

The nose started to lift, the inclinometer went haywire and all at once they were sliding stern first towards the earth. Within a matter of seconds it was very clear to Gayer that it was no use hoping the elevators would bring them back on an even keel. With no ballast available to counteract the angle of descent, it was equally obvious to him what had to be done. He glanced questioningly at Wenke, and thinking he seemed paralysed with indecision, hesitated no longer. He tripped the release switches, jettisoning the remaining ten 110-pounders and sixty thermite incendiaries.

"You imbecile," Wenke hissed, "you stupid imbecile, now you'll have woken them up again."

"I'm sorry." Gayer clenched his hands in an effort to control his anger. "It seemed the only way to stop us falling out of the sky."

"Instead of which, the British will probably shoot us out of the sky, thanks to you."

The L72 hadn't slid backwards of her own accord. At least two gas cells must have been well and truly peppered for the Zeppelin to behave the way she had, and they were lucky the red-hot shell fragments hadn't triggered off a

hydrogen explosion in their wake. What was he supposed to do anyway? Stand there and hope the Almighty would intervene and save them from destruction? They had lost close on 2000 feet already and were still descending, despite his prompt action.

Ehrlich said, "We're five degrees down by the stern, Herr Oberleutnant. That's the best I can do."

"Very good." Gayer watched the altimeter unwind past 8000, thinking his automatic response had been utterly futile in the circumstances. A few more hundred feet and they would run out of cloud. And the guns were firing again; he couldn't see the shell bursts but he could hear them.

"They haven't the faintest idea where we are," Wenke said, voicing Gayer's unspoken thoughts.

"No, sir."

"So we'll just have to pray the searchlights don't find us if we drop below the cloud base."

They continued to lose height but their rate of descent gradually fell off until the Zeppelin finally achieved something approaching equilibrium several hundred feet below the altostratus. In vain, the searchlights probed the sky looking for them above Poplar where the last stick of HE and incendiaries had landed. The guns continued to fire hopefully but inaccurately for a further ten minutes; then the beams went out and the barrage ceased.

Presently Wenke said, "We'll have to gain height before we can think of re-starting the engines."

"Yes, sir," Gayer said, all energy sapped out of him.

"Therefore I want you and August to list, pound by pound, every item of equipment we can afford to jettison."

"That is going to take us quite some considerable time," Gayer warned.

"So what?" said Wenke. "We're not going anywhere."

Molders opened his eyes and found that he was lying on the floor with his head resting against a side wall. He couldn't see too clearly because he was bleeding profusely

from a deep cut just below the hairline, but there was obviously something very wrong with his left arm because it was bent at a curious angle from the elbow. He was also pinioned by a dead weight across his pelvis, which puzzled him. Wiping the blood from his face, he saw that it was Olbricht, his skull an unsightly mess of shattered bone and brain tissue. I'm going to be sick, Molders thought, and tried to sit up; a shaft of excruciating pain persuaded him to abandon the idea and he sank back groaning.

Muzzily, he heard a voice from the opposite side of the gondola say, "I'd lie still if I were you, Chief."

"Dollmann?"

"Right first time. I'll be with you as soon as I've finished attending to Hassell."

"Is he badly hurt?" Molders asked faintly.

"Put it this way," said Dollmann, "he'll find it painful to sit down."

Molders wiped his face again and looked about him, taking stock. Two mechanics had replaced Hassell and Olbricht on the port and starboard Maxim guns, leaving one mechanic to watch the telegraph. The engines were shut down and there was a large patch of oil on the floor. "What happened?"

"We got hit," said Dollmann. "A bloody great shell exploded under the gondola; Olbricht bought it, Hassell got a splinter up his backside and you slammed into the portside Maybach and knocked yourself out. That's what happened."

"Where's this oil coming from?"

"It's leaking from the same engine that laid you out. There's a damned big hole in the sump." Dollmann left Hassell and walked over to Molders. Bending down, he grabbed Olbricht by the arms and dragged his body clear. "You don't look too good to me, Chief," he said, gazing thoughtfully at Molders.

"I'll be okay once I'm on my feet again."

"I still think you should take it easy."

Molders gritted his teeth. Dollmann was the bane of his life, always had been, always would be. "Why don't you

shut your stupid trap and help me up?" he said wearily.

"Well, all right, it's your funeral. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Dollmann grabbed hold of his good right arm and yanked him up. A wave of agony engulfed Molders; black spots danced in front of his eyes and he felt sure he was going to pass out. Then the pain gradually subsided until it was just tolerable, and his head cleared.

"You've broken your arm," Dollmann said accusingly, as though the injury had been self-inflicted. "I can see a piece of bone sticking out."

"It's my elbow."

"I'm glad it's not mine."

"It's not broken, I've just dislocated it. One good jerk and it will snap back into place."

Dollmann looked doubtful. "You don't want me to have a go at it, do you?"

"That's the general idea," said Molders. "You'd better take hold of my wrist and give it a sharp tug when I say the word."

"I'll use both hands, shall I?"

"If you like." Molders clenched his right fist, digging the nails into the palm. "Now," he said.

"Now, what?"

"Pull, you stupid idiot."

Dollmann gave his arm a savage jerk. There was a loud crack and Molders groaned and almost fainted for the second time.

"There," said Dollmann, "is that any better?"

"A bit, except that the arm feels as if it's on fire."

"You must expect some discomfort," Dollmann said sagely. "Would you like a shot of morphine to ease the pain?"

Molders sucked on his teeth. A shot of morphine would do wonders for the ache in his arm but it would also make him feel drowsy, and that would never do. The raid had been one long chapter of disasters so far, but things could only get worse with Dollmann in charge of his department.

"Forget the morphine," he said. "We'll make a sling for

my arm out of one of the shell dressings. You can also stick a bit of lint over the cut in my forehead."

"That's just what I was about to suggest, Chief."

"Well, get on with it then, don't just stand there," Molders said irritably. "We'll be getting under way again any minute."

"I doubt it," said Dollmann. "They're still doing their sums in the control car."

"What?"

"Oberleutnant von Gayer; he buzzed me on the intercom a while ago wanting to know how much fuel we could afford to jettison." Dollmann unravelled a shell dressing, tied the ends together, looped it over Molder's head and eased his injured arm into the crude sling. "I told him two hundred gallons, Chief. It seemed a nice round number."

You stupid ox, Molders thought, and started calculating. The slip tanks hanging from the box girders under the keel contained 2400 gallons. That was roughly the equivalent of 12,000 pounds, but he would need to subtract the amount they'd already consumed and allow upwards of 7000 gallons for the return leg to Nordholtz. It could even be less because they were unlikely to reach anywhere near their normal cruising speed on four engines. But he wasn't thinking straight; his estimate was meaningless, for he didn't know where they were, nor did he have the latest fuel consumption figures at his fingertips.

"We'll have to dip the slip tanks."

"All in good time," said Dollmann. "Just hold still while I stick this lump of gauze over the cut."

"Leave it. Call Berger on the voice-pipe and tell him to get started."

"I thought of that some time ago," Dollmann said, unperturbed. "Right now, he and Vermehren have got their hands full helping Ratz to repair the holes in the number 5 and 6 gas cells."

There was no need for Sewell to read the duty officer's log; the visual display map told the whole story much more graphically. Twelve Zeppelins had set out to raid

England, one had been destroyed and two had almost certainly turned back before they reached the coast. Eight had dropped their bombs as far afield as Hull, Birmingham, Leicester, Bedford and St Albans and run for home. Only one had reached London, bombing Woolwich Arsenal at 0135 hours and then Silvertown an hour and three quarters later. Then, five minutes after that, the intruder had dropped a stick on Poplar.

Lieutenant Dawlish of the Royal Horse Guards was convinced that more than one raider was involved but the fair-haired WAC corporal believed it was the same Zeppelin, and Sewell was inclined to agree with her. She was, he thought, a darned sight more intelligent than Dawlish.

"What do you think, Corporal?" he said. "Has that damned Zeppelin gone home or is it still with us?"

"I have a feeling that it's somewhere in the Metropolitan area, sir."

"So do I." Sewell pursed his lips. Unfortunately, the sound locators had lost track of the intruder and if the Hun did manage to sneak away from London without being detected, he would have a clear run all the way to the east coast. There was a good chance one of the listening stations between the Wash and Southend-on-Sea would hear the Zeppelin coming some twenty miles away, but whether the RFC could act on their information was another matter. Without wireless communication they lacked flexibility; once the planes were up in the air, it was impossible to direct them on to a target from the ground. "What have we got in reserve, Dawlish?"

"Nothing, Colonel. The last patrols will have taken off some time ago."

"There's 523 Squadron at Reigate, sir," the WAC corporal said quietly.

"What about them?"

"Well, I seem to recall that Major Wharton's last patrol is scheduled for 0345 hours."

"Is that correct, Dawlish?" Sewell demanded.

Dawlish went through the patrol programmes, then looked up again with a sheepish smile. "Yes, Colonel. I'm afraid it slipped my mind."

Sewell glanced at the visual display map again. The BE's radius of action was just over a hundred miles, its endurance three hours. That meant Wharton's squadron at Reigate could patrol the coast from Southend to Harwich for one hour. Somebody would have to plug the gap between Harwich and the Wash. No use looking to Farr's squadron; they didn't have the range to do more than cover the southern bit and they'd also taken a hammering tonight by all accounts. But 198 Squadron at Cambridge was nicely placed to do the job and most of their planes would have been refuelled and rearmed by now.

"All right, Dawlish," he said, "telephone Major Wharton and tell him that his last patrol is not to take off until I say so. Then get me 198 Squadron at Cambridge."

Sewell thought he ought to give the WAC corporal a pat on the back. She was a very bright girl and a damned sight more alert than Dawlish, even though she had been on duty all night. What the hell was her name again? He'd asked her several times already tonight but kept forgetting it. He seemed to recall there was a connection between young Dawlish, one of the counties and her name. Dawlish was a small town on the south coast of Devon. Sewell nodded; he'd got it now.

"You're a very intelligent NCO, Corporal Devonshire," he said, beaming at the girl.

"Cornwall, Jennifer Cornwall, sir."

"Of course."

Jennifer smiled, then said, "I wonder if that Zeppelin has been damaged, sir?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It came under very heavy fire when it was attacking Silvertown and five minutes later it dropped a stick of bombs on Poplar. I can understand the Germans attacking Woolwich and Silvertown but there are no military objectives in Poplar." Jennifer raised her shoulders in a shrug. "Perhaps they weren't aiming at anything, perhaps they were forced to jettison their bombs over Poplar?"

The girl might have a point, Sewell thought. And if the Hun commander had dropped those bombs because his

Zeppelin had been damaged, he might have to jettison a lot more stuff to stay up in the air. Everything that wasn't essential would be thrown out, leaving a trail of junk across the countryside. In that case, he wouldn't have to rely entirely on the sound locators to detect the intruder. If the civilian police were alerted, he might learn in which direction the Zeppelin was heading and that would enable him to concentrate a pack of fighter planes to intercept it. Scotland Yard; he would telephone Scotland Yard and ask them to alert their people and the County Constabularies outside the Metropolitan area.

"That's a brilliant deduction, Corporal Devonshire," he said.

"Thank you, sir," she said without a flicker of annoyance that he had got her name wrong for the second time in as many minutes.

15

Farr heard the Crossley tender move off and scowled. The driver was having a busy night; one trip to Elstree with two airmen to guard his plane and how many to St Albans? Three? Four? No matter; he would probably have to make another before the night was over. Frank was bound to find a few more bodies for the mortuary before he was through. Yarborough was still alive though, which was a miracle considering how his plane had been reduced to a pile of junk by the elm tree. And the doctors reckoned he would pull through, but of course it was unlikely that he would ever walk again. Still, Yarborough was better off than Jarvis, although he'd had his doubts about that when they started to pull him out of the wreckage. Morphine was supposed to alleviate pain but it hadn't done a lot for Yarborough; the poor little

sod had been semi-conscious the whole time, screaming and crying for his mother.

Farr stood up and flexed his right leg. Normally the calf muscle didn't bother him but tonight it had really knotted up, making his slight limp much more noticeable. Probably that cycle ride from Elstree was the cause of it. Or maybe it was purely psychological? Maybe he was limping out of a sub-conscious desire to let everybody know that he too had been through the mill? Now cut that out, Farr told himself; go on thinking like that and you'll end up in a mental asylum. Do something useful instead of skulking in this corner of the field avoiding everyone. He started back towards the farmhouse, saw Lethbridge coming towards him and felt his stomach turn over.

"Hi," said Lethbridge. "I've been looking all over for you."

"And now you've found me," Farr said evenly.

"Yeah. Well, I thought you'd like to hear the good news." Lethbridge smiled, his eyes creasing. "Edna Asher and the Shiltons' daughter are still alive. We sent them off to hospital in the Crossley tender a few minutes back. The Land Army girl's got a busted arm and leg and the kid is suffering from shock, but they'll be okay."

One of the few good things that had happened all night, Farr thought, then remembered the Shiltons had a son as well as a daughter. "What about the boy?" he asked.

The smile vanished from Lethbridge's face. "I'm afraid he was dead when we dug him out."

Farr went through his pockets, dug out a packet of Gold Flake, lit two cigarettes and passed one to the American. "I've killed a lot of people tonight, Frank," he said, his voice tight. "Moorhouse, Collins, Jarvis, Craddock, Davies, Hailwood, Millie Robinson, the Shiltons and their son."

"You didn't kill them, Matthew," Lethbridge told him quietly. "The Zeppelin did."

"It would never have found us if I hadn't lit the runway for Collins. And that's what's so tragic about the whole damned business; Collins was a good pilot, he didn't need a flarepath to guide him in. He could have set his BE

down without any help from me."

"The hell he could. Why else would Collins have buzzed the field and gone round again if he wasn't asking for help?" Lethbridge drew on his cigarette. "It was just a lousy break, that's all."

"I suppose that is one way of looking at it."

"Is there any other? Okay, so we took a beating tonight, but don't tell me this is the worst you've known."

Farr knew Lethbridge was right. Le Cateau and Loos hadn't exactly been a picnic, and he had done enough heart-searching for one night. It was time he picked up the pieces and put the squadron together again. He flicked his cigarette into the air, then set off towards the dispersal area where Broadhurst was sorting things out with Corporal Wilson and some of the fitters. Taken by surprise, Lethbridge hurried after him.

"Can we talk to Air Defence Headquarters yet, Frank?" he asked when the American finally caught up with him.

"I don't think so. The line party's back though."

Farr nodded; they'd probably found the break but not the missing field telephone. No problem though; if it was necessary to phone Sewell, he could always send Allchurch into St Albans again when the Crossley tender returned. He could go himself, come to that.

"What's the good news, George?" Farr asked, drawing near Broadhurst.

"What good news?" Broadhurst said, wearing his gloomy bank cashier's expression. " 'A' Flight has ceased to exist. We've got two FEs locked together, Yarborough wrote his off and Allchurch's machine has ended up in the next field along with the fitters' marquee. Your Vauxhall's all right though; the canvas top is missing and the windscreen has been shattered, but it's still a runner."

"This squadron consists of more than just 'A' Flight and my car, George," Farr said with a faint smile.

"Well, you do have two serviceable BEs – the one Moorhouse arrived with from Farnborough and Frank's, which the riggers have just finished patching."

"They're both ready to go, are they, George?"

"Yours is, Frank's isn't," said Broadhurst. "His plane

still has to be refuelled and rearmed."

"I see."

Farr glanced at his wristwatch. Five minutes to four; the first light of day would be creeping above the horizon in less than two hours. It would take Corporal Wilson roughly fifteen minutes to get Frank's plane ready but there was no reason why he shouldn't take off now. On the other hand, was there really any point in going out on patrol? There had been no signs of activity over London for quite some time now and for all he knew the raid was over. Morale was low enough as it was; mounting two abortive sorties could only make it worse. Before they took off, he ought to make sure there was some purpose to their mission, that there was a Zeppelin still around.

Farr said, "I'm going into St Albans to phone Air Defence Headquarters. While I'm away, Frank's plane is to be refuelled and rearmed and the bonfires marking the runway kept going until first light. I also want two mechanics sleeping by the planes in case Frank and I have to take off in a hurry."

"I'm supposed to hang around until you return," said Lethbridge. "Is that the idea?"

"Yes. We're not going out on patrol until I'm satisfied we have some chance of encountering the enemy." Farr turned to Broadhurst again. "And another thing, George; get the cooks to brew some tea and break open the rum ration."

"Can you do that?" Broadhurst asked. "Issue a rum ration?"

"I wouldn't know, George. Let's just do it and argue about the rules later."

"Right." Broadhurst frowned. "How long will you be in St Albans?"

"Who knows?" Farr shrugged. "Until I hear something definite or somebody finds our missing field telephone. I'll be squatting in the military exchange if you need me."

"I've got a better idea," said Lethbridge. "Why not sit it out in The Peacock Hotel on Broad Street? It's a darned sight more comfortable than the military exchange and they're on the telephone. You'd probably get through to

London a lot quicker too."

"It's a thought, but the hotel will be locked and barred at this hour of the morning. I doubt if the hall porter will let me in."

"He will if I'm with you," said Lethbridge.

"You've just talked me into it," Farr said and moved towards the Vauxhall.

"Who's driving?"

"I am," said Farr. "You can swing the starting handle."

Gayer climbed up into the hull and made his way aft, flashlight in one hand, millboard in the other, Petty Officer Paulus and Leading Telegraphist Jurgens close behind him. Paulus was apprehensive and shivering inside his pea-jacket. Jurgens was in a more cheerful mood and whistling tunelessly to himself, his relatively high morale mainly due, in Gayer's opinion, to the fact that Paulus was scared and jittery.

Molders was waiting for him with Dollmann in the stern above the rear engine gondola, as they'd arranged. Coming up to them, Gayer noticed that the Warrant Officer had his left arm in a sling and a piece of bloody gauze on his forehead.

"What's happened to you, Chief?"

"I dislocated my elbow, Herr Oberleutnant. Banged my head into the bargain."

"You didn't mention it when I spoke to you on the intercom a few minutes ago."

"I thought we had more important things to worry about," said Molders.

"You need a drink, Chief." Gayer tucked the millboard under one arm, produced the flask of Schnapps from his bridge coat and unscrewed the cap. "Here," he said, passing it to Molders, "take a swig of this. It'll do you the world of good."

"Thank you, sir." Molders raised the flask to his lips and tipped it back. The raw spirit burned his throat and sent a warm glow through to his stomach. "I feel a new man," he said, returning the flask to Gayer.

"Put wool in your socks, did it, Chief?" Dollmann said.

Gayer hesitated. A nudge was as good as a wink, but if he gave Dollmann a drink he would have to offer one to Paulus and Jurgens. And it wouldn't stop there; Ratz, Vermehren and Berger were still working on the number 5 and 6 gas cells directly behind Molders. "Sorry, Dollmann, medicinal purposes only."

"I think I've caught a chill," Dollmann said.

Gayer ignored the cheeky hint, screwed the cap back on and slipped the flask into his pocket. Then he removed the millboard from under his arm and held it in front of the flashlight for Molders to see. "Leutnant Koch and I have been doing some calculations, Chief. What do you think?"

Molders ran his eye down the list. Spare ammunition, illuminating flares, slip tanks, spare wireless batteries, furniture, hatch covers, bomb racks, et cetera, et cetera; the number of items was more impressive than the total weight involved. "What's the et cetera, et cetera?" he asked.

"Anything you can dispense with, Chief." Gayer smiled. "Like the odd spare engine you don't need."

Molders grunted. "You've overlooked something, sir."

"Oh? What's that?"

"There are a couple of 110-pounders hung up in the racks. Dollmann found them when he was having a look-see before you arrived."

"They'll have to stay there until we're clear of London. We'll jettison them over open countryside after they've been defused." Gayer saw the puzzled frown on Molders' face, and said, "I know what you're thinking, Chief, but it's a question of minimising the noise. Everything has to be done with stealth. That's why we're starting with the aluminium slip tanks."

"They'll make a hell of a clatter when they hit the ground."

"The petrol won't," said Gayer. "I want you to disconnect the tanks, up-end them and empty the contents. Hopefully, this will provide sufficient lift to take us up into the altostratus. Then we can start the remaining two engines in the rear gondola and begin to creep away."

"I'm going to need some help," said Molders.

"You'll have Jurgens and Petty Officer Paulus."

"This job will take hours with only the four of us, Herr Oberleutnant."

"You can grab Berger and Vermehren as soon as Ratz has finished with them. Now will you please get started, Chief."

Molders nodded. "There is just one other thing, sir."

"What's that?" Gayer found it increasingly difficult to control his exasperation. They were running out of time and every minute counted, but it seemed there was no hurrying the chief engineer.

"You said only to keep enough fuel for 185 miles." Molders paused, then said, "With respect, sir, Nordholtz is much further than that."

"We're not going to Nordholtz," Gayer told him. "We're making for Ghent."

"Ghent?"

"It's in Belgium, Chief, miles behind our lines," Gayer said, and moved past him towards Ratz.

The sailmaker still looked bad to Gayer, his face drawn and moist with perspiration. The bandage around his head had worked loose and was only held in place by the encrusted blood.

"How are you doing?" Gayer asked him quietly.

"We're coming along. I reckon we've lost about 30,000 cubic feet from this cell, twice that from number 6." Ratz turned about and trained his flashlight on the underside of the number 6 gas cell, illuminating a large patch on the cotton fabric. "The shell splinter left a five-inch rip in the outer cover," he said succinctly. "It exited the other side halfway up. Berger and Vermehren are behind the cell, patching the hole."

Gayer said, "Molders needs all the help he can get. How soon can you release them?"

"He can have Berger and Vermehren now if he likes. I can finish it off on my own." Ratz sniffed, then wiped his nose on the sleeve of his pea-jacket. "Is it my imagination, Herr Oberleutnant, or are we still losing height?"

"I think we are, a little."

"I thought so. Some of the punctures made by the ice must have got overlooked."

"But that happened hours ago," Gayer protested.

"Yes." Ratz wiped another dewdrop from his nose. "Those off-duty seamen didn't really know what they were doing. I should have checked."

We all make mistakes, Gayer reflected, and it was a little late in the day for recriminations. Besides, Ratz looked done in. "How about a little Schnapps to keep you going? I should have offered you some before."

"That's all right, sir, I don't drink."

"Really?" Gayer frowned; that was something else he hadn't known about Ratz. His knowledge was absolutely abysmal. "Well, keep up the good work," he said, thinking as soon as he'd said it how stupid it sounded.

"You can rely on me," said Ratz.

Gayer moved on to the stern and inspected the crucible. The rudder and elevator seatings didn't seem to be damaged but he decided Ehrlich had better take a look at them to make sure. He made a note to this effect on his millboard, then made his way forward and stopped beside Molders to ask how many gallons he planned to jettison.

"Seven hundred," said Molders. "That'll leave us with 450 gallons. Should be enough to reach Ghent."

"More than enough, Chief."

Seven hundred gallons was roughly the equivalent of 3500 pounds. That wasn't too bad, but it would be nicer still if they could squeeze a few extra pounds. Gayer turned back a page and found the calculations he and Koch had made earlier. At her best economical speed, the L72 consumed 110 gallons an hour and they'd lifted off from Nordholtz just over twelve hours ago. It seemed Molders wasn't being over-cautious, or was he? With two engines unserviceable, surely they could afford to ditch a couple more slip tanks?

"We're not getting on very quickly," Molders said.

"You've got Berger and Vermehren, Chief. How many more men do you want?"

"As many as I can get."

"I'll see what I can do." Gayer tucked the millboard

under his arm. "Incidentally, you can jettison another hundred gallons."

"What?"

"You heard me; ditch another hundred," Gayer said firmly, and walked away.

Gayer called the control car on the forward voice-pipe, told Wenke he wanted Ehrlich to examine the crucible and persuaded him to dispense with the relief helmsman. Then, in spite of his vow and with considerable reluctance, he climbed the seventy-eight foot ladder to the top platform and, taking pity on the bedraggled machine gunners, passed his flask of Schnapps round before sending two of them below to assist Molders. It was, he told himself, simply a case of enlightened self-interest. With their hands frozen stiff, the machine gunners were incapable of using a spanner. He wiped the rim, raised the flask to his lips and discovered it was empty.

"Bastards." Gayer shoved the empty flask into his pocket and moved to the ladder. "Bastards," he repeated with every step on the rungs.

Farr pulled up outside The Peacock in Broad Street and switched off the ignition. The hotel was dark and silent, the heavy curtains drawn in the rooms downstairs.

"I don't see any sign of life, Frank," he said. "Are you sure there's a night porter on duty?"

"Of course there is. I should know, I practically live here."

Lethbridge got out of the Vauxhall, crossed the pavement in a couple of strides, and beat a tattoo on the front door with a clenched fist. Somewhere round the back a dog started barking.

Several minutes later, a chink of light appeared in the hall and a disgruntled voice said, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Tom – Frank Lethbridge."

Two bolts slid back, top and bottom, a key turned in the lock and the door opened inwards a fraction A moon-shaped face peered round the jamb and Farr stuck a foot in the gap in case Tom should have second thoughts about letting them in.

"You're very late, Mr Lethbridge," Tom said accusingly. "It's a quarter past four, sir."

"Yeah, so it is." Lethbridge put his shoulder to the door and shoved. "We've been kind of busy tonight," he said, advancing inside, the night porter retreating in front of him. "But I guess you know that."

"Oh yes, sir, the Zeppelins have been over here all night," Tom said, "and they dropped a fair number of bombs near the railway." He gazed at the two men, his eyes taking in their dirty uniforms and tired faces streaked with oil and brick dust. "It looks as though you gentlemen have had quite a night of it too."

"You can say that again." Lethbridge placed a hand on Farr's shoulder. "This is Major Farr, Tom. I'd like you to fix him some coffee and sandwiches while he telephones Air Defence Headquarters in London."

"From here, sir?"

"Well, I'm afraid our telephone is out of order," Farr said, stifling a yawn.

"So I told the Major he could use your phone." Lethbridge dipped into his pocket, found some silver coins and pressed them into the porter's hand. "That's okay, isn't it, Tom?"

The porter nodded, then turned to Farr. "If you'd like to come this way, Major. I think you'll find the manager's office quite comfortable."

"I'm sure I shall." Farr glanced over his shoulder, saw Lethbridge making for the staircase and smiled knowingly.

Charlotte sealed the envelope down and addressed it to Second Lieutenant F. Lethbridge, RFC. It hadn't been the easiest of letters to write and she had found it very difficult to say the things she had to say without seeming pathetic, angry or hurt. But it was done now, along with everything else. The dressing table and chest of drawers were empty, her suitcase and hat box packed. There were still a few things hanging up in the wardrobe, clothes she'd had to leave behind to make room for the dresses and underwear she'd bought in St Albans, but no doubt

the hotel could parcel them up and post them on to her.

Charlotte yawned, then heard a tap on the door and froze, both arms stretched above her head. I must be hearing things, she thought, but the tapping went on, persistent as a woodpecker.

"Yes?" Charlotte cleared her throat. "Who is that?" she asked in a louder voice.

"Frank. Who else would come knocking at your door at this hour of the morning?"

"Go away, Frank."

"What?" Incredulity echoed in his voice.

"I don't want to see you again," she said wearily.

There was a momentary pause and she could visualise him frowning, unable to believe his ears.

"What is this?" he asked, sounding hurt and puzzled. "Some kind of joke?"

"I'm not joking, Frank. I'm leaving you." Charlotte clenched her hands, tried to control the tremor in her voice. "I've explained everything in a letter."

"Leaving me? I think you'd better open this door, Charlotte. We've got to talk this over."

Charlotte didn't answer him, just stood there in the room, her limbs trembling.

"You hear me?" The door knob rattled. "I said we've got to talk this over."

"We've nothing to say to each other. Now please go away."

"I think you'd better open this door, Charlotte," he said loudly. "Because if you don't, I'm liable to kick it in and wake the whole damned hotel."

He meant it too. She knew him well enough to know he wasn't bluffing. His hand slapped a panel, making a pistol crack that startled her. He hit it again with the flat of his palm and somebody grunted in the adjoining room.

"Oh God," Charlotte moaned, and moved to the door, opening it hurriedly.

"That's better," Lethbridge said, smiling at her. He stepped into the room and, still facing her, closed the door behind him. "Now, what's all this nonsense about leaving me?"

Charlotte stared at him, her mouth slightly open. Frank looked awful, his face lined and tired, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy, as though he'd aged ten years in a few hours. "My God," she whispered, "what have you done to yourself?"

"It's been one hell of a night." His eyes travelled from the wardrobe, hanging open, to the suitcase and hat box on the floor nearby. "Seems it isn't over yet either," he said wryly.

"I've written you a letter," Charlotte said, her voice husky.

"So you said. You want me to read it? Or are you going to tell me why to my face?"

Charlotte swallowed but stood her ground. "I suddenly came to my senses."

"I'd say you've taken leave of them," he said and moved a little nearer to her.

"No." She shook her head vehemently. "No, you're wrong, Frank. For the first time in weeks, I've been thinking clearly for a change."

"I mean to marry you, Charlotte."

"What?" She blinked several times. "You can't be serious."

"I've never been more serious in my life," he told her.

"Marry me? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. I have two sons and I'm far too old for you."

"What's five years between us?"

"Seven," Charlotte said, "it's seven years. You see how little you really know about me?"

"Five, seven, ten; what the hell do I care? If I don't marry you, I know I'm going to spend the rest of my life regretting it."

"This is all a bit sudden, isn't it?" Charlotte said faintly. "You didn't feel this way yesterday afternoon."

"I've grown up since then, aged that seven years you're so worried about." Lethbridge dug the crumpled application out of his pocket and showed it to her. "This is my night for being totally honest. Once a week, regular as clockwork, I've been requesting a transfer to a squadron in France, and regular as clockwork Farr has consigned

every application to the wastepaper bin. It got so that I knew I could count on him doing just that, but early yesterday evening he signed it. It was only then I realised what I'd done and that I would probably never see you again. I couldn't bear that, so I retrieved it from his out-tray."

"Behind his back?"

"To begin with, but like I said, this is my night for total honesty. I told Farr I'd done it and the reason why on our way here. I told him that I love you." Lethbridge smiled. "You see," he said, "you're not the only one who's been thinking clearly. Only difference is, I've known it deep down for quite some time."

"So have I, Frank."

"Then why don't you unpack? It's kind of premature to be thinking of a honeymoon right this minute. I'm told it takes three weeks to arrange a church wedding." He frowned. "Maybe we could get a special licence or something?"

"You're crazy, Frank." Charlotte ran a hand through her hair. "Absolutely crazy."

"Yeah, I know, but you'll get used to it," he said, and kissed her.

She waited, expecting him to slip the dressing gown from her shoulders and fondle her, knowing that if he did, it would somehow be a betrayal of everything he'd just said, that nothing had changed, that she was still only a piece of home comfort he was reluctant to lose. But he didn't lift her nightdress, nor did he steer her towards the bed. Instead, he kissed her again, then released her and walked over to the chair and sank down in it.

"Jesus, I'm tired," he said, "bone tired."

Presently his eyes closed and his head drooped forward on to his chest. Tenderly, Charlotte covered him with a blanket and placed a pillow behind his head, taking care not to wake him. Then she started to unpack.

Twenty-one miles from St Albans and 8000 feet above Walthamstow, Dollmann emptied the last slip tank.

Seconds later, Molders started the two Maybachs in the rear gondola and the L72 began to steal away from North London, stealthily as a fox in the final hour of darkness before the dawn.

Friday, March 23rd, 1917

0510 Hours
to
0822 Hours

16

Low-heeled shoes clacking on the concrete floor of the basement roused Sewell from a light slumber. Opening his one good eye, he looked up to find the fair-haired WAC corporal smiling at him, the inevitable cup of tea in one hand.

"Thank you, Corporal Cornwall." He smiled and reached for the cup and saucer. "You see, I remembered your name this time."

"Yes, sir." The smile travelled to her eyes, making them sparkle.

Blue, Sewell observed, bluer than the sea on a summer's day. A very attractive girl, intelligent and well-spoken, too. He frowned, wondering what on earth was the matter with him. He was thirty-six, nearly old enough to be her father, a professional soldier and a confirmed bachelor.

"Has there been any news of the Zeppelin?" he asked gruffly.

"No, sir."

No word from Scotland Yard then, and nothing from the sound locators. He stared at the visual display map, bare now except for a lonely symbol in the East End of London.

"Major Wharton phoned again, wanting to know if he could stand his squadron down."

"I'd be more surprised if he hadn't." Ever since Dawlish had telephoned him at 0335 hours, Wharton had called at half hourly intervals wanting to know when, if ever, his pilots would be allowed to take off. "That Zeppelin is still around," Sewell said fiercely. "I know it is."

"Yes, sir."

Was it his imagination or did she sound less convinced? Well, it was ten minutes past five in the morning and the

cold light of day less than fifty minutes off. Perhaps the intruder had slipped through the net after all? How many bombs had been dropped on London since the air-raid warning had been sounded? Fourteen on Woolwich, sixteen around Silvertown and eight on Poplar; that was about a full load for one Zeppelin.

The phone tinkled, disturbing his train of thought and arousing a momentary hope. Then watching Lieutenant Dawlish as he answered the call, Sewell noticed the way his lips were pursed and knew different.

"It's the Resident Clerk at the Home Office, Colonel," Dawlish said, cupping the earphone and mouthpiece with both hands.

"Again?" The Resident Clerk was becoming as persistent as Wharton down in Reigate. "Tell him the answer is still the same," Sewell said. "Tell him in words of one syllable that I will order the 'All Clear' to be sounded when I'm satisfied there are no Zeppelins over London, and not a moment before."

"I'm afraid the boot is on the other foot now, Colonel," Dawlish said coolly. "He is telling us the 'All Clear' will be given at five fifteen unless we have definite proof that there is an intruder. Apparently those are the instructions he's received from Downing Street."

"Downing Street?" Sewell repeated heavily.

"The Cabinet Office," Dawlish said.

"In that case, there's nothing else to be said, is there?"

Sewell turned his back on the watchkeeping officer and looked at the display map again. The raid was over, Lloyd George had said so, and who was he to argue about it? Dawlish believed it was; perhaps Corporal Jennifer Cornwall did too?

"Shall I stand the squadrons down, Colonel?" Dawlish asked. "We have six at instant readiness, including Major Farr's." He smiled disparagingly, thinking two planes hardly constituted a squadron.

"I'm sure that Zeppelin hasn't crossed the coast yet. It's still up there somewhere in the clouds."

"It will be light in less than an hour, Colonel."

"And I'll lay odds the Hun isn't making for Alhorn, or

Tondern, or Wittmundhaven, or Nordholtz or wherever it was he came from. He's heading for Ostend, running silently on two engines; that's why he can afford to take his time."

"Yes, Colonel." Dawlish winked at the WAC corporal behind Sewell's back and got a cold, very disdainful stare in return.

"So you can stand everybody down with the exception of 198 Squadron at Cambridge."

"Yes, Colonel."

"And Farr's squadron," Sewell added quickly. "We mustn't forget him. Life wouldn't be worth living if we did."

Gayer leaned over Koch's shoulder and studied the map pinned to the chart table. The neat and firmly drawn pencil lines that had taken them over Dartford in Kent towards Croydon in Surrey and back to Woolwich, across to Canvey Island and on to Silvertown were ancient history now. As of this minute, he was interested in a much newer pencil line, one that started from a faint question mark somewhere near Walthamstow and ran east through Chigwell in Essex to Brentford across to Burnham-on-Crouch and on out to sea above Foulness Point.

"Where do you think we are, August?"

"Here." Koch drove the point of his pencil into the chart, making a tiny hole midway between Chigwell and Brentford.

"Or thereabouts," Gayer said, grinning.

"No." Koch looked up at him, a muscle twitching under his left eye. "No, I mean exactly there."

Gayer did not see how he could be so positive. The moon had set and cloud obscured the ground below and the fading stars above. "I'll take your word for it, August," he said cheerfully.

"Are you implying that I don't know where we are, Herr Oberleutnant?"

Gayer felt his jaw drop. He could not remember a single occasion in the past when August had addressed

him as Herr Oberleutnant. They were good friends and August had always treated him as a sort of younger brother in need of protection. Up till now, he had seen Koch as strong where he was weak, supremely confident where he was uncertain, and had believed August didn't know the meaning of fear. But this was a new Koch, worried, defensive, unsure of himself and frightened.

"You know I'm not," Gayer said, determined to take the heat out of the situation. "I just wanted to make sure it's safe to jettison some of the heavy equipment."

"Of course it is. There's nothing below us except wide open fields."

"Good, that's what I hoped you'd say."

Gayer returned to his post at Wenke's shoulder and checked the altimeter again. They had lost close on 1500 feet in the last half hour and he reckoned they would be lucky to reach the Belgian coast the way things were going.

"We shall pull through, Friedrich," Wenke said, as though reading his thoughts.

Gayer nodded. "With your permission, sir, I'd like to dump some of the unessential stores."

"By all means. Exactly what are we losing from the control car?"

"The four oxygen cylinders, the parachute flares, hatch cover, chart table and all unnecessary items of furniture."

"Add the wireless set and spare batteries to your list, Friedrich. We shan't be calling Nordholtz and Borkum again. It would be nice to know our precise position but we can't risk breaking radio silence. The British are sure to be monitoring our wavelengths and they'd pinpoint us the moment we came up on the air."

It was difficult to quarrel with Wenke's assessment even though it did place a heavy burden on Koch's shoulders. Denied the navigational facility provided by the direction-finding stations, he was unable to verify his calculations. Gayer could understand now just why August was so keyed up.

"What are you waiting for, Friedrich?"

"Nothing, sir."

Gayer buzzed the rear gondola on the intercom and told Molders that his mechanics could drop the empty slip tanks overboard. Then, leaving Paulus, Jurgens and the relief helmsman to strip the control car and radio shack, he climbed up to the keel and made his way aft to inspect the two 110-pounders that were still in the external racks.

Dollmann gripped the ring spanner with both hands, braced his feet against the engine block and heaved. The veins stood out on his wrists and presently his arms began to tremble.

"The damned nut won't budge," he grunted.

"Of course it will," said Molders. "You're not trying hard enough."

"I tell you it's rusted solid. Put a drop more oil on it, then maybe we'll get somewhere."

Molders wiped the nut with a piece of cotton waste, inspected the protruding threads of the cylinder head bolt and squirted a few drops of oil over them. As far as he could see, the nut wasn't cross-threaded nor were there any signs of rust.

"All right, Dollmann," he said, "let's see what you're made of."

Dollmann took a deep breath and tried again, exerting every ounce of his strength. The nut gave a fraction, then turned freely. Removing the ring spanner, Dollmann undid the nut with his fingers and lifted the cylinder head off.

"Dump it overboard," said Molders.

"It'll be a pleasure, Chief."

For you, you brainless unfeeling ape, Molders thought, but not for me. Although the portside engine was unserviceable, it wasn't so badly damaged that the base workshops couldn't repair it, and it seemed almost criminal to destroy such a beautiful piece of machinery. The oil sump, carburettor, cylinder head, distributor and exhaust manifold had already gone; now Hassell was lying flat on his stomach the other side of the engine,

undoing the mounting bolts that anchored the Maybach to the floor.

"How are you doing?" Molders asked him.

Hassell said, "My backside is bloody sore, Chief. I think it's bleeding again."

"I was talking about the mounting bolts."

"Oh, they're coming along all right. Only one more to go, then I can start on the other side."

"I can get on with that," Dollmann said.

Molders looked at him suspiciously. "It's not like you to volunteer for anything," he said.

"I'm turning over a new leaf." Dollmann clucked his tongue. "How much do you think this engine weighs, Chief?"

"About 350 pounds."

"It's going to take some shifting, and you and Hassell won't be able to do much, will you?" Dollmann clucked his tongue a second time. "That only leaves me and the other three mechanics."

Molders glanced round the gondola looking for some item they could use as a crowbar. The brass guardrails surrounding the other two Maybachs were no good. They were liable to bend and would be useless the moment any leverage was exerted on them. They would just have to attach a couple of ropes to the lifting eyes on the block and drag the engine as far as they could, then get behind it and shove it out of the hatch. Dollmann and the others would need some help but Gerhold Ratz could spare Vermehren for a few minutes to lend them a hand.

"Every pound counts, doesn't it, Chief?"

"It certainly does," Molders agreed.

"Then why don't we get rid of Olbricht?" said Dollmann. "He must weigh all of a hundred and sixty pounds."

Molders stared at him, horrified. "That's the most outrageous suggestion I've ever heard," he said angrily.

"For God's sake, he's dead. What harm can it do? If we were at sea, Ratz would sew him up in a sheet of canvas, the padre would mumble a prayer or two and we'd consign him to the deep."

"That's different."

"I don't see that it is," Dollmann said stubbornly. "Besides, he's in the way."

"Then move him."

"Anything you say, Chief." Dollmann stooped, lifted the dead man across his shoulders and heaved him through the hatch. "There, how's that?" he asked, turning to face Molders again.

Molders picked up the ring spanner with his right hand. He knew Dollmann had deliberately misinterpreted his words, knew it from the smirk on his stupid face, but there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it, at least not in the presence of witnesses. He'd get even with him though. As soon as they'd ditched the engine, somebody would have to climb out on to the roof of the gondola and disconnect the radiator. And of course there was Adler, still confined in the midships portside engine gondola; it was about time somebody took a look at him to see how he was getting on. Two lousy and very risky jobs for Dollmann. Molders relaxed his tight grip on the ring spanner and tossed it to the machinist mate. "Undo the mounting bolts," he said curtly, "and don't be all day about it."

Gayer sighed. He had spent a good twenty minutes studying the two 110-pounders from every angle, hoping that by some miracle they would leave the rack of their own accord before he had a chance to disarm them. But they were still there, large as life and twice as ugly. There was no easy way out; not with Petty Officer Ratz and Vermehren watching him and wondering no doubt why he simply didn't get on with the job instead of dithering around like an anxious old woman. He would have to lower himself over the box girder and crawl along the rack a mere four and a half feet below the envelope. Nothing to it really, except that his mouth was bone dry, the sweat was running down his face and his bladder felt as though it was about to empty at any moment.

"I should have brought my parachute," Gayer said and laughed nervously.

"I would offer to lend you mine," said Ratz. "But as you know, I wasn't issued one for this trip."

Gayer nodded. Of course Ratz didn't have one; he had withdrawn it, fulfilling that bargain he'd made with Sergeant Lehr. Still, he could put that right.

"You can have Olbricht's. He won't be needing his any more."

"That reminds me," said Vermehren. "I haven't got one either, Herr Oberleutnant. I left mine in the gondola with Adler."

"Then you'll just have to fetch it, won't you?" Gayer said in a tight voice.

Vermehren mulled it over, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "If it's all the same to you, sir, I think I'll take my chances. I don't fancy climbing that ladder again."

Gayer didn't blame Vermehren. Nothing on God's earth would persuade him to tackle it. He just wished he hadn't told Wenke that two general purpose bombs were hung up in the racks, then he wouldn't have been faced with this nerve-racking job. Reluctantly, he picked up the length of rope at his feet, lashed one end to the girder and passed the other around his waist, tying it in a bowline. He tested both knots to satisfy himself they were secure before straddling the girder as though on horseback. He leaned forward, pressed his trunk and face against the beam and held on tight. Somehow he found the courage to raise his left leg and twist round to lie across the girder, head and chest still inside the keel, legs dangling in space. The rack was less than twelve inches below him but the distance seemed a thousand times greater before his feet eventually touched it.

He had cleared the first hurdle. Now all he had to do was turn round and crawl to the far end of the rack. A simple balancing act, one that Molders would have performed without a qualm; but he wasn't Molders and had always suffered from vertigo. Still, at least Ratz and Vermehren would be able to haul him inboard if the slipstream should blow him off his narrow perch. They would have him back inside the keel before he had time to

count up to twenty, wouldn't they? After all, he was a comparative lightweight, a mere 160 pounds. Gayer had convinced himself that two men could handle such a burden with ease when he noticed Ratz was alone.

"Where the hell has Vermehren gone?" he shouted.

"Molders sent for both him and Berger," said Ratz. "Seems they're having trouble jettisoning the portside engine."

He could do one of two things: climb back into the keel or wait for Vermehren to return. If he opted for the former, Gayer knew he could never bring himself to start all over again. On the other hand, the way his legs were trembling, he'd be paralysed with fright long before Molders let Vermehren go. 'Best do it now.' The advice he was giving himself was at odds with the fear that threatened to turn his bones to jelly. 'Yes, do it now and get it over with.' Holding on to the box girder with his left hand, Gayer turned about and, bending at the knees, grabbed hold of the rack with his other hand. Then he let go of the box girder, transferred his grip to the rack, crawled to the far end and lay flat.

The two 110-pounders were side by side directly below him, fat, dart-shaped things with percussion type detonators screwed into the nose. Turning slightly on to his right side, Gayer took the fuse key out of his pocket and attempted to match the two protruding lugs top and bottom of the open-ended spanner with the recesses in the fuse. The patience of Job and a delicate sense of touch; that's what he needed. Then, just when it seemed he would never get the hang of it, the lugs engaged and he was able to unscrew and remove the fuse. He moved back a few inches and tackled the second bomb, shouting triumphantly when the lugs married with the recesses at the first attempt.

He removed the fuse, returned the key to his pocket and peered through the lattice work, trying to determine why the bombs had refused to leave the rack earlier on when he had tripped the release switch in the gondola. The claws were, he noticed, partially open but still gripping the 110-pounders around the waist. Obviously a

fuse must have blown in the circuit; however, since he wasn't a qualified electrician, he would have to rely on other means to free the wretched things. A little muscle power might do the trick, Gayer decided, and tried pushing the nose of the innermost projectile with his left hand. When that failed to dislodge it, he lay flat and used both hands to press down on the nose and fins. He taxed his strength to the limit, uttered every four-letter word he'd ever heard, and still met with failure.

"You bastard," he said aloud, "you stinking bloody great bastard."

He pushed himself into an upright position and straddled the bomb rack. Then raising both knees to his chest, he slammed his feet down so that he was practically standing on the bomb. The claws sprang open and the 110-pounder fell away, the seemingly immovable object finally yielding to an irresistible force. He inched forward again and attacked the second projectile in the same manner, successfully dislodging it at the fourth attempt.

The soles of his feet now bruised and sore, the insides of his thighs grazed and bleeding, Gayer levered himself towards the keel and grabbed hold of the box girder. Ratz leaned over the side, seized the collar of his bridge coat and hauled him into the catwalk.

"I did it," Gayer said, his voice high with excitement. "By God, I did it."

"Yes, sir." Ratz pursed his lips. "What did you do with the fuses?"

The fuses? Gayer froze, his mind a complete blank. The detonator inside was powerful enough to remove a limb and the fuse was designed to explode on impact. What the hell had he done with them? Hands shaking, he explored both pockets, found one in each and hastily dropped them over the side.

"Do you know," he mumbled shakily, "I don't even remember putting them there?"

"You would have done if they'd detonated, Herr Oberleutnant. It must be your lucky day."

"I hope you're right," Gayer said before he threw up.

The first unusual occurrence report received by the headquarters of the Essex Constabulary at Chelmsford came from a police sergeant at Buckhurst Hill who reported that the badly mutilated body of a German seaman had been found in a baker's yard. Then at twenty-three minutes to six, the night duty officer at Epping Police Station phoned in to say that although no explosions had been heard, two bombs were thought to have landed somewhere near the railway line.

Normally, a résumé of these incidents would have been sent to the Home Office later that morning. On this occasion, however, the information was telephoned direct to Scotland Yard.

17

Broadhurst struck a match, shielded the flame with a cupped hand and re-lit his pipe. Saxon's Farm in the cold grey light of dawn was easily the most depressing sight he'd ever seen. He could turn his back on the wrecked planes in the dispersal area, avert his gaze from the heap of rubble that had once been a farmhouse, but there was no avoiding the unsightly litter scattered far and wide. Wherever he looked, Broadhurst could see scraps of paper, kitbags, socks, mess tins, shirts, groundsheets, letters, blankets, empty cigarette packets, odd boots and shoes. A battlefield was, he thought, simply a badly disorganised municipal rubbish tip.

Broadhurst tossed the spent match away, shoved both hands into the pockets of his breeches and strolled towards the cookhouse tent. Glass crunched under his foot and he froze in mid-stride as though he'd just trodden on the prongs of an anti-personnel mine that had failed to explode. Backing off a pace, he bent down and picked up

the portrait of a young woman in VAD uniform. He turned the silver frame upside down, shook out the broken glass and then carefully wiped the photograph with the sleeve of his jacket. The restoration work was less than successful. He'd always been heavy footed, especially on the rare occasions he'd been coaxed on to a dance floor, and the heel of his boot had crushed the glass into hundreds of tiny fragments so that the girl's face was largely disfigured.

"Farr's going to love me," he muttered, recognising the silver frame.

A harsh barking cough fractured the early morning silence and, looking up, he saw Bennett marching purposefully towards him, ramrod straight, arms swinging waist high. The sergeant major halted ten paces from him, right foot slamming into the grass as though he were on the parade ground at Wellington Barracks. His right arm seemed to move with the speed of light, crooked at the elbow and quivered, the hand rigid, the index finger in line with his right eyebrow.

"Good morning, sir," Bennett said in a voice almost loud enough to be heard in Whitehall.

Broadhurst removed his pipe and returned the salute, his eyes riveted on the sergeant major's boots, marvelling that in the midst of chaos he'd polished them until the toecaps were gleaming. Bennett was clean-shaven too, and his uniform was creased in all the right places.

"It's going to be another lovely day, sir."

Broadhurst looked up at the overcast a thousand feet or so above him. "You think so?" he said dubiously.

"Sure to be. There was some ground mist in the next field earlier on; that's always a good sign." Bennett turned his head, whipped out a handkerchief and held it to his mouth seconds before he started coughing again. His chest seemed to cave in and Broadhurst could hear the sputum bubbling in his throat before he spat it into the handkerchief. Then the paroxysm slowly died away and he returned the bloodstained handkerchief to his pocket. "Sorry about that," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "must be the cold air."

And the chlorine gas you inhaled at Gommecourt, Broadhurst thought. "It often affects me the same way," he said, silently acknowledging Bennett's reluctance to talk about his health. "Sometimes I think I should give up smoking."

"It depends on how much you enjoy it." The sergeant major cleared his throat, an indication that he had more important matters to discuss with Broadhurst than his personal habits. "This place is a shambles," he announced.

"My thoughts exactly," Broadhurst agreed.

"Still, it shouldn't take us long to get things properly organised again. I suggest we put reveille back to six-thirty to give the men a bit of a lie in. None of them got much sleep last night."

Broadhurst suppressed a smile. An extra fifteen minutes in bed was hardly a lie in. "Good idea," he said. "What time will you have breakfast?"

"Seven forty-five," said Bennett. "That will give us the best part of an hour to clear up some of this mess and sort out the litter. Most of the squadron files are missing."

"I'm not surprised, Sergeant Major."

"Then after the men have shaved and had breakfast, we can repitch the tents which were uprooted by the blast. Once that has been done, I recommend we muster the squadron for a complete kit check."

"You seem to have thought of everything," Broadhurst said admiringly.

"I shall need every man."

"Of course."

"Including those two mechanics sleeping by the planes."

"You can forget them." Broadhurst raised an eyebrow. "Unless of course you don't mind explaining to Major Farr why they were removed?"

"Not me," said Bennett. "I don't go looking for trouble."

Farr opened his eyes, gazed blankly at the square of blotting paper directly in front of his nose, then sat up, a

crick in his neck, his back aching. The ashtray on the hotel manager's desk was brim-full with cigarette stubs and the atmosphere inside the tiny office reeked of stale tobacco smoke. Yawning, he pushed the chair back and moved to the window, drew back the curtains and let in some fresh air. It had been a rough old night, he thought, and the pale light of dawn didn't look all that promising either.

Farr turned away from the window, looked at the clock on the wall and compared the time with his wristwatch. Six-fifteen: the duty bugler would be sounding reveille any minute now, unless Broadhurst had altered the routine in his absence. He wondered if the staff at Air Defence Headquarters had forgotten him. Dawlish, the duty watchkeeper, had phoned an hour ago to say that although the 'All Clear' was about to be sounded in London, his squadron and 198 at Cambridge were to remain at instant readiness until further notice. It was thought a damaged Zeppelin was slowly heading towards the east coast, Dawlish had said, quoting Sewell, but Farr doubted if that supposition still held good. On the other hand, Sewell was a meticulous staff officer and it would be most unlike him to overlook the fact that two of his Home Defence squadrons were on full alert. He would wait then, hang around The Peacock Hotel until he heard something definite from Sewell, or Broadhurst sent word that they'd found the field telephone and were hooked up with the military network again.

Why not stay here for breakfast? Of course he would need to spruce himself up a bit, but that shouldn't be a problem; Frank was bound to have a razor handy so he could borrow his shaving tackle. Then, around eight o'clock, he would telephone Laura and tell her everything he'd put in the letter that had disappeared along with the squadron office. Or better still, he could take a leaf out of Frank's book and ask her to join him. He'd get nowhere by being wishy-washy about it though. 'Pack a suitcase, catch the two-fifty slow train to St Albans and I'll meet you at the station'; that was probably the best approach to take with Laura.

The telephone rang feebly as though somebody was

cranking it by hand Farr waited to see if anybody would answer the extension at the reception desk. When nobody did, he lifted the receiver off the hook and said, "Peacock Hotel, Major Farr speaking."

"Just the man I want," said Sewell. "What's the weather like your end?"

"Not too bad at all and improving by the minute. It's still a little overcast but visibility's pretty good." Conditions were not as good as he made out. The overcast was down to a thousand feet but Farr thought there was a chance it might lift within the next hour or so.

"198 Squadron are fogged in."

"Well, they get a lot of ground mist around Cambridge this time of year." Farr hesitated, then said, "That Zeppelin's still around, isn't it?"

"The sound locators haven't detected it, but the body of a German seaman was found at Buckhurst Hill and the police at Epping say two dud bombs were dropped near the railway line at five forty-three this morning."

"That's more than half an hour ago," Farr said.

"Yes, he's got quite a head start on you. Trouble is, I thought the Hun would cross the coast between Southend and Harwich and make for Ostend but now it looks as though he's running for home. If you project a line from Buckhurst Hill through Epping and on, you'll see that it would take him over Norwich to cross the east coast between Cromer and Great Yarmouth. That's roughly a hundred and ten miles from Saxon's Farm."

There was no need for Sewell to spell it out for him. Farr knew they were faced with a time and space problem in which all the relevant factors were adverse. By the time he and Lethbridge reached Great Yarmouth, they would have less than two hours to find the Zeppelin before their tanks ran dry. On the other hand, if they waited until the sound locators detected the intruder, they would never catch up with the damned thing. It seemed they were going to lose out whatever they did. Or would they? His lot and 198 Squadron were on standby because Sewell believed the Zeppelin was damaged, a supposition that was based on the fact that the intruder had jettisoned

eight bombs over Poplar shortly after attacking Silvertown. That had happened around three-fifteen, as he recalled, and no commander in his right mind would spend another two hours over London unless he was forced to. Nor would he then take the long way home.

"Are you still there?" Sewell asked irritably.

"You know something?" Farr said. "I think that Hun has got himself lost. What's more, it won't be long now before he tumbles to it."

"You could be right," Sewell conceded.

"Well, if I am, I think we should look for the Zeppelin somewhere between Harwich and Great Yarmouth."

"Then what are you waiting for, Matthew?" Sewell said, and hung up on him.

Farr slammed the receiver back on the hook, grabbed his flying jacket and stormed out of the office. The night porter was in the lobby sorting out the morning papers, but he didn't stop, merely yelled to him to fetch Lethbridge and ran out into the street. The Vauxhall was wet with condensation from the moist air and he just hoped it wouldn't go all temperamental on him. Leaning inside the car, he set the ignition and fuel levers on the steering column and moved round to the front. As soon as he swung the starting handle he could tell it was going to be one of those mornings when the engine would need a lot of coaxing.

Lethbridge was dreaming that the engine of his BE was knocking intermittently; then somebody called his name and he woke up, heart thumping. Alert now, he recognised the night porter's voice, gathered Farr wanted him in a hurry and tried to scramble out of the armchair, the blanket still wrapped around his legs. He stumbled, went down on hands and knees, swore loudly, ripped off the blanket and got to his feet again. Charlotte's tousled head appeared above the bedclothes and he kissed her, told her he would be back, and was out of the room and running along the landing before she had time to ask him what was happening.

He took the stairs two at a time, raced through the

lobby and practically tore the street door off its hinges as he barged it open and ran out on to the pavement. Farr was behind the wheel, revving the engine, and without breaking the rhythm of his stride, Lethbridge vaulted into the back, then climbed over into the passenger seat.

"How's that for perfect timing?" he asked, breathing heavily.

"Not bad," Farr told him, "but you're out of condition. Too many late nights, that's your trouble."

Farr shifted into first, let the clutch in, pressed his foot down on the accelerator and made a U-turn, the tyres screaming in protest. He changed up through second, third and into top and was doing well over fifty before they reached the end of the street.

Lethbridge gripped the door with one hand, the edge of his seat with the other, and braced his feet against the floor. "For Pete's sake," he said, "take it easy."

"Stop worrying," Farr said. "I know how to handle this car."

Lethbridge watched the speedometer needle go past sixty, released his grip on the door, and huddled lower in the seat seeking what protection he could from the chill airstream whipping over the bonnet. "Are you going to tell me what this is all about?" he shouted above the engine noise.

"One of our visitors stayed over. Air Defence Headquarters think he could be making for the coast between Harwich and Great Yarmouth."

"How do you think we're going to find him in this murk?" Lethbridge yelled, pointing up at the overcast.

"I don't know, Frank. Maybe this will be our lucky day."

The way Lethbridge saw it, they would be lucky to arrive at Saxon's Farm in one piece. They were out in the open country now, the trees and hedgerows flashing past in one long blur. The dashboard was shaking as though afflicted with St Vitus' dance and he couldn't bring himself to look at the speedometer any more. He tried closing his eyes but that didn't stop him mentally and physically hitting an imaginary brake pedal every time Farr cornered at speed. Then, at last, they turned off the road

into the narrow muddy lane that led past the demolished farmhouse. Still driving like a madman, Farr shot across the grass field, horn blaring to scatter the working parties like chaff before the wind. Fifty yards further on, he slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt at the end of the double line of bell tents.

Slowly, very cautiously, Lethbridge raised his head above the dashboard. "Are we walking the rest of the way?" he murmured.

"Maps," Farr shouted to Broadhurst. "See if you can find a couple for the Harwich-Great Yarmouth area, George."

Lethbridge started to get out, then flopped back again as Farr let in the clutch and sped on towards the dispersal area. "Jesus," he complained, "you might have warned me."

"I didn't know you were about to leave me," said Farr. "Furthermore, it's your job to stick to me like glue. Once we're airborne, I want you tucked in close alongside me where I can see you."

"Sure," Lethbridge said. "You're the boss."

"Good. At least we've got that straightened out."

Farr pulled up beside the two planes, switched off the engine and got out of the Vauxhall. Pulling on his flying helmet and leather gauntlets, he hurried over to Moorhouse's BE, climbed into the cockpit and strapped himself in. Corporal Wilson stood by the prop, eyebrows raised questioningly, waiting for him to begin the drill, but he hung on until Broadhurst reached the plane and thrust a folded map into his hand.

"Switches off," he called to Wilson.

"Switches off," Wilson repeated.

"Suck in." Ten yards away, Farr could hear Lethbridge going through the same drill with his mechanic.

"Switches on," Wilson called.

"Switches on." Farr tripped the ignition and shouted, "Contact."

"Contact," Wilson yelled, and swung the prop.

The engine caught first time and he ran it up, the plane rolling slowly forward. Glancing to his left, he waved

to Lethbridge, then opened the throttle and thundered down the runway between the patches of burnt grass, all that remained of the bonfires they'd lit the night before. Gracefully, like a bird taking wing, the BE lifted off and soared above the devastated farmhouse.

Farr circled the field once; then with Lethbridge tucked in alongside, he headed due east towards Harwich.

18

Gayer entered the hull, grabbed hold of a bracing wire to steady himself, and removed the flashlight from the pocket of his bridge coat. He was tired, so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open, but Wenke had ordered him to check the gas cells again and when the swarthy, diminutive but iron-willed Carl-Ernst told you to do something, you jumped to it and did your best to seem alert and responsive. He sniffed, his nose wrinkling in disgust at the sour odour of vomit on the bridge coat. He had done his best to clean himself up after the business with the bomb fuses, ruining a good silk scarf in the process, but the smell still clung to him. It was there on his breath too, a foul combination of rancid liverwurst and smoked sausage spiced with garlic that made Koch blanch whenever he went near him.

He swept the flashlight from side to side and moved slowly forward, taking short mincing steps like a woman hobbled by a long, tight-fitting skirt. The inclinometer in the control car indicated that the L72 was seven degrees down by the stern but the gradient seemed much steeper than that. But he mustn't let his imagination get the better of him, he thought, and made a determined effort to walk more naturally.

A few paces further on, his flashlight illuminated a wiry, ginger-haired man. "Ah, Vermehren," he said, "you're back then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Found any leaks so far in these cells?"

"Not yet," Vermehren said. "But the pressure's down in number 17. Gerhold reckons it must have been punctured by the ice thrown off by the control car engine, but I can't find any holes."

"How much pressure have we lost?" Gayer asked.

"Fourteen pounds, Herr Oberleutnant."

Gayer frowned. If ice were the cause, they would have lost more than that in the ten hours that had elapsed since they'd descended from 19,000 to 12,000 feet. Unless of course the punctures were microscopic.

"Maybe the outer skin is porous?" Vermehren suggested tactfully.

"It's more likely to be the gas valve. Anyway, keep looking." Gayer swept his flashlight up and down the number 17 cell and spotted a square-shaped canvas pack wedged between the duralium girders a few feet above the catwalk. "I see you've collected your parachute," he said.

"Yes, sir." Vermehren swallowed. "From now on I'm not letting it out of my sight."

"Quite." Gayer nodded, then said, "Where's Petty Officer Ratz?"

"In the stern by number 5 and 6 cells. The chief engineer and Dollmann are midships, checking on Adler."

Both Molders and Dollmann? Unless they had asked his permission, which they hadn't, one of them should be on duty in the rear engine gondola at all times. He would have to have a few words with the chief engineer and remind him that standing orders applied to every member of the crew regardless of rank.

"All right, Vermehren," he said presently, "do what you can with this cell and don't forget to keep checking the ones up forward."

"No, sir."

Gayer looked thoughtfully at the canvas bag wedged between the girders. The three parachutes belonging to the machine gunners were still where he'd dumped them, behind the ladder in the bows. They were going to need them in a hurry if anything untoward should happen in the next hour or so, but the thought of climbing up to the top gun platform for the fourth time appalled him. He'd done it once too often already; somebody else would have to go.

"One other thing, Vermehren," Gayer said casually. "Just nip up top and tell the gunners they can collect their parachutes."

"Yes, sir."

Vermehren sounded reluctant; understandably so, Gayer thought, knowing how daunting he'd found the seventy-eight-foot ladder.

He walked on, sweeping the flashlight beam from side to side; 15, 14, 13, he counted off the cell numbers to himself. And there was number 12 hanging in shreds, the initial cause of all their difficulties. Gayer shook his head and quickly moved on towards a grim-faced Molders by the midships hatch.

"Is everything okay, Chief?" he asked, suddenly disinclined to reprimand the injured warrant officer for leaving his post without permission now that they were face to face.

"I suppose so." Molders scowled. "Dollmann's just taking a look at Adler to see how he is."

Gayer backed off a pace, surprised by his malevolent tone. Although aware that Molders regarded Dollmann as a cross he had to bear, he'd never seen him so openly hostile towards his deputy before. They'd obviously had a blazing row about something, but maybe he should ignore it? After all, there were times when it was prudent to turn a blind eye.

"Are you planning to bring Adler up into the keel?" Gayer asked, ducking the issue.

"I think moving him would do more harm than good."

"Yes, I dare say you're right, Chief." Gayer rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "All the same, if Adler were up here in

the keel, we might be able to do something about that gondola."

"Like what?" Molders asked him.

"Well, it should be possible to strip the engine down and lighten our load a bit. We're still losing height you know."

"Even if we are, none of my mechanics are going to touch that Maybach. It's upside down."

"I'm aware of that," Gayer said patiently.

"They'd have to lie flat on their backs, the engine directly above them. If the mounting bolts gave way, 350 pounds of metal would come down on top of them. I wouldn't even allow Dollmann to tackle that job."

"Isn't there anything else we can jettison, Chief? What about in the rear gondola for instance?"

"We've already stripped it bare except for the essentials. Dollmann got rid of the portside radiator soon after we ditched the engine."

Dollmann again; the chief engineer was certainly riding him hard but Gayer was loth to interfere. As far as he was concerned, Molders deserved a medal not a rebuke. "I guess we'll just have to keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best then," he said lamely.

"I reckon we will." Molders stared at him pointedly, and said, "I'll let you know how Adler is, Herr Oberleutnant."

Gayer turned brick red. Who the hell did Molders think he was talking to? How dare he dismiss him in such a curt manner as though their ranks were reversed? He gripped the flashlight, clenching it so hard in an effort to control his temper that his hand began to tremble.

"Good, you do that," he snapped, and marched off still boiling with anger.

Ratz placed the can of dope on one side, picked up the square of cotton fabric between forefinger and thumb and crawled behind the number 3 gas cell to fix it in place. The fingernail hole in the outer cover, which had obviously been made by a tiny fragment of the shell that had burst under the rear engine gondola, had escaped his

notice until now but fortunately only a minimal amount of hydrogen had been lost.

"More trouble?" Gayer asked in a loud voice.

"Nothing serious," Ratz said, crawling out from under. "I caught it before it got too bad."

"Just as well," said Gayer. "We're down to 4500 feet as it is."

"When do you think we'll cross the English coast, sir?"

"About ten minutes from now. Of course, we shan't descend below the cloud base to check our position until we're a good twenty miles offshore."

"I never thought we'd pull it off," said Ratz. "I mean, everything seemed to be against us."

Us? Everything was certainly against Ratz. There would be no reprieve for him, no triumphant return, only a prison cell and a court martial. The Pour le Mérite for Wenke, the Iron Cross Second Class for Molders and a rendezvous with a firing squad for Ratz.

"Did you collect Olbricht's parachute?" Gayer asked, suddenly arriving at a decision.

"Yes, sir."

"Then put it on and jump out."

"What?" Ratz gaped at him, eyes popping.

"Do it the moment I leave you. Believe me, it's your only hope."

Abruptly, Gayer turned about and walked back the way he had come. Short of helping Ratz on with his parachute, there was nothing more he could do for the sailmaker. He wondered what the penalty was for aiding and abetting a prisoner to desert in the face of the enemy. Death? That seemed the most likely sentence, but they would have to prove their case first, and unimportant little men like Sergeant Lehr wouldn't dare to lift a finger against a von Gayer unless they had concrete evidence to substantiate the charge.

Suppose Ratz didn't jump? Suppose he told the Judge Advocate that although he had been encouraged to desert by his superior officer, he had preferred to appear before the court martial and prove his innocence? God Almighty had he made a terrible mistake to trust a known

political agitator like him? If so, then he was in trouble up to his neck; and it seemed more trouble was waiting for him midships, noticing the way Molders and Dollmann were squaring up to each other.

"Break it up," Gayer roared. "That's an order."

"It's just a friendly argument, Herr Oberleutnant," Dollmann called back.

"Like hell it is." Gayer ran forward, stepped between the two men and shoved them apart. "I know a fist fight when I see one."

"You're wrong, Herr Oberleutnant." Molders pointed to his injured arm. "I'd be a fool to pick a fight with only one good hand."

"You were about to," Gayer said, floundering.

"And I know better than to hit a warrant officer," Dollmann said.

Gayer didn't believe them. The moment his back was turned they would be at it again. He didn't know what their quarrel was about nor did he wish to know. The only thing that mattered now was keeping them separated until they reached Ghent.

"You can go back to the rear gondola, Chief," he said curtly. "Dollmann's staying here."

"But I need him, Herr Oberleutnant."

"You must think I was born yesterday. You've already got three mechanics to watch two engines, not to mention Hassell and Berger." Gayer took a deep breath. "Now move yourself," he snapped.

Molders hesitated, then turned slowly about and walked away. One of us will have to go, Gayer thought. We can't work together after this. Chief engineer or executive officer; Wenke would have to choose between them and there were no prizes for guessing who he would plump for.

"That put him in his place," Dollmann muttered.

"Hold your tongue." Gayer rounded on the machinist mate. "I don't want to hear another peep out of you."

"Molders has got it in for me, sir."

"You will not go near him. Is that understood?" Gayer demanded.

"Yes, sir." Dollmann licked his lips. "But suppose Molders comes looking for me?"

"You will call me on the forward voice-pipe the moment he puts foot in the keel." Gayer paused and looked down, suddenly aware that the beam of his flashlight was spotlighting a parachute pack near Dollmann's feet. "Whose is that? Adler's?"

"It belongs to Vermehren," said Dollmann. "He left it behind in the gondola and I brought it back with me."

Vermehren; Gayer smiled derisively. No wonder he had been reluctant to pass the word to the machine gunners on the top platform; the little bastard had helped himself to one of their parachutes. "By the way, how is Adler?" he asked, still preoccupied with Vermehren.

"Unconscious but alive," Dollmann said.

And Vermehren worrying only about his parachute. How different to Ratz; no two men could be less alike. Vermehren would go to any lengths to save his own skin, whereas Ratz was going to die honourably for a crime he most likely hadn't committed. Gayer trained his flashlight aft, guessing even before the beam picked him out that Ratz had made no attempt to put on his parachute. Two hours from now the petty officer would still be there at his post because he was brave and selfless and perhaps a little stupid.

But Gayer's assessment was wide of the mark. Minutes after he returned to the control car, Ratz slipped on his parachute, climbed over the keel, lowered himself below the envelope and let go.

Farr tucked the map under his left leg. Sewell had telephoned him at twenty minutes past six, they'd taken off at six forty-three and now, fifty minutes later, there was Harwich ten perhaps twelve miles ahead.

That was pretty good going, but the Zeppelin had a lead time of over an hour on them and there was no sign of the damned thing. Although the overcast was beginning to disperse, there was plenty of cloud cover around and the Magog Hills over Cambridge way were shrouded

in mist. That meant 198 Squadron were still grounded and they were on their own unless Sewell had been in touch with the Admiralty and they had alerted the Royal Naval Air Service squadron at Harwich. The fact that they had the sky to themselves neither proved nor disproved that possibility. However, it did indicate to him that the sound locators around Harwich had not detected the Zeppelin.

Farr looked at Lethbridge flying alongside him, tapped his chest with a gloved hand, then pointed north to show that he wanted them to turn and fly up the coast towards Great Yarmouth. Lethbridge nodded, side-slipped and pointed the nose of his plane in the required direction.

Projecting a line from Buckhurst Hill through Epping and on, Sewell had concluded the Zeppelin was heading towards Norwich. Farr checked his wristwatch and saw that it was now seven thirty-five. Almost two hours had passed since the intruder had dropped two dud bombs near the railway line at Epping, and Norwich was roughly ninety-five miles from there. If the Hun was going flat out, they'd already lost him but if, as Farr suspected, the damaged Zeppelin was no longer capable of even reaching its normal cruising speed, then there was a chance they could nail the airship before it crossed the coast between Cromer and Great Yarmouth.

He still believed the Hun had got himself lost, but that was entirely irrelevant. So far as he knew, the Zeppelin had not broken wireless silence up till now, nor was it likely to. And that being the case, then sooner or later her commander would have to descend below the cloud base to check his position.

Koch reached for the deck log and checked the latest entry relating to the wind speed and direction. A horrible suspicion that he'd based his calculations on the readings taken at 1845 hours yesterday evening instead of the ones recorded six hours later was confirmed the moment he compared the two sets of figures. Yesterday's windspeed at 19,000 feet bore no relation to the one taken in the early hours of this morning and in allowing for the wrong

drift, he'd made an error of six degrees. From the moment he'd plotted their new course over Walthamstow, they had been steering six degrees north-east of the line he'd fondly imagined they were taking. According to his reckoning, they had cleared Foulness Point fifteen minutes ago, whereas in fact, they were still somewhere over England.

The bile rose in his throat; this was the Rügen sandbanks in the Baltic all over again, except that it was far worse this time. There had been no navigational error at Rügen in November 1904, only a stupid captain in command of their fast patrol boat who'd over-ruled his pilot and given the wrong course correction to the helmsman and run them aground as a result. Both of them had been tried by court martial, convicted and sentenced, the captain losing two years' seniority while he, the innocent party, had been severely reprimanded. It hadn't ended there either. All kinds of subtle pressures had been brought to bear on him until finally he'd acceded to the wishes of his superior officers and resigned his commission. Twenty-one years old and his career finished; that's how it had been. Then, after ten years on the beach and a lousy job as a tallymaster on the Hamburg docks, the Navy had welcomed him back with open arms, rescuing him in the process from a disastrous marriage to a slut who'd found herself a lover less than eighteen months on from their wedding day.

Welcomed him back with open arms, had they? Like hell they had. The Rügen incident was still fresh in too many staff officers' memories; that's why the Admiralty had palmed him off on the Naval Airship Division. And of all the Zeppelin captains on strength, only Wenke had been prepared to accept him as a navigator; now he had betrayed that trust by sheer stupidity and incompetence. How he had made such a monumental and elementary mistake was quite beyond his comprehension, but it had happened, and putting it right was the only thing that mattered.

Koch forced himself to think logically. First things first, he told himself; work out our present position, then plot a

course for the nearest landfall in Belgium. He measured six degrees from the existing course with its starting point at Walthamstow and projected the bearing, wishing he still had the chart table as a working surface instead of the floor. Norwich; the line went through Norwich and crossed the coast midway between Cromer and Great Yarmouth.

"What's our present speed, Herr Oberleutnant?" he asked, surprised that his voice sounded so calm.

"Thirty-five knots," said Gayer. "Same as it has been for the last two and a half hours."

Koch did a quick piece of mental arithmetic, concluded they were seven and a half miles south-west of Norwich, and plotted their position on the map. It was obvious that Ghent was a non-starter and Ostend was too far south, but he thought they might just have sufficient fuel left to reach Zeebrugge. Koch picked up his ruler and drew a line from their present estimated position to Zeebrugge, measured the bearing from grid north and converted it to magnetic. Then he wrote the new course heading on a scrap of paper, got up off his hands and knees and approached Wenke.

"I've made a stupid mistake, sir," he said quietly.

"Yes?" Wenke too was very quiet. "Where are we then, Pilot?"

"Approximately seven and a half miles south-west of Norwich."

"Ah," Wenke said and cleared his throat.

Koch waited, expecting the roof to fall in, but nothing happened. The total silence in the control car was however just as unnerving. His hand trembling, he showed Wenke the scrap of paper.

"I've worked out a course to Zeebrugge, sir."

"I see." Wenke pursed his lips. "How much fuel do we have, Friedrich?"

Gayer swallowed. "I told Molders to keep 350 gallons. That was sufficient for six hours at reduced speed."

"That's not the answer to the question I asked," Wenke said, still calm and apparently unruffled.

"We've three and a half hours' worth, sir," Koch said.

"And how far are we from Zeebrugge?"

"One hundred and twenty-one miles or three hours twenty-five minutes at our present speed."

"It's going to be a close-run thing," Wenke observed.

"Yes, sir." Koch licked his lips. "Of course, I may have over-estimated the distance."

"I think we'd better verify our position before we change course."

"You mean you're going to descend below the cloud base?" Gayer said.

"Is there any other way of checking our exact position?"

"We've no ballast and everything that can be jettisoned has been jettisoned. Once we go down, we stay down."

"And what would you have us do, Herr Oberleutnant?" Wenke said coldly. "Stay up in the clouds and hope for the best? Hope that when we do run out of fuel we'll be over dry land and the right country?"

"No, sir."

"Then take us down," Wenke said tersely.

An order was an order and had to be obeyed unquestioningly; Gayer had learned that as a naval cadet. Without further hesitation, he buzzed the rear gondola and warned Molders they were about to descend below the cloud base. Then, following Wenke's instructions, he posted two extra lookouts in the control car, detailing Petty Officer Paulus and Leading Telegraphist Jurgens to watch port and starboard respectively. That done, Gayer checked the inclinometer, saw that the Zeppelin was still seven degrees down by the stern and began to valve the gas cells in the bows to bring the L72 on to an even keel. As soon as the spirit bubble indicated they were straight and level, he told Ehrlich to trim the elevators by three degrees and continued to release the hydrogen from numbers 16 to 20 cells.

The altimeter began to unwind from 4500 to four thousand to three five to three. At two five, the cloud layer started to thin out, becoming wispier. A patchwork of green and brown fields began to appear, then suddenly they were in clear sky, the altimeter registering just

under 2000 feet. Away on the horizon they could see a large dark blob on the brown and green landscape.

"I suppose that is Norwich?" Gayer asked dubiously.

"Of course it is," said Wenke.

"Well, if that's seven and a half miles, I'd hate to walk it."

"So would I." Wenke turned to Koch. "I imagine we've been encountering a strong headwind," he said dryly.

"I'd like to believe that."

Wenke glanced at the scrap of paper Koch was holding. "One one seven degrees," he mused.

"That's by dead reckoning before I knew our exact position. It'll only take me a couple of minutes or so to work out the correct course."

"You'd better get on with it then," Wenke said.

Koch took bearings on three prominent landmarks and added 180 degrees in each case. Returning to his chart, he went down on all fours, identified the landmarks and plotted the back bearings to pinpoint their exact position. He heard Gayer remark facetiously that at least the natives didn't seem to be hostile, and somebody laughed nervously, two minor distractions he could have done without. He worked on, hands shaking, beads of perspiration on his forehead, until at last he had the answer.

Then he said, "Steer one one four, helmsman."

"Steer one one four," Fiesler repeated, and put the helm over.

"Thank you, pilot," Wenke said, sounding as if he really meant it.

Gayer moved to the portside of the control car and stood there, marvelling at Wenke's self-control. A while back, he had honestly believed that it would be an absolute travesty if Wenke were to be decorated with the Pour le Mérite, but now again he saw the man in a different light. No, that wasn't true. For his own peace of mind, he needed to have implicit faith in Wenke and except for a few brief hours, he'd always trusted the Kapitanleutnant's judgment. If anyone could bring them home safe and sound it was he.

Then Jurgens said, "Two aircraft in sight approximately 6000 yards to starboard," and his faith in everyone died.

Farr and Lethbridge had almost completed two sides of a triangle when the Zeppelin showed itself. For a minute or so, Farr couldn't believe what he saw, couldn't believe that the small cigar-shaped object that had appeared below the clouds some ten miles away wasn't simply an hallucination. A trick of the mind, he thought, an illusion conjured up by a subconscious desire, but then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lethbridge waving to him and knew different.

Doubt gave way to elation and he felt on top of the world, as though he had just downed several glasses of champagne. Moreover, Farr was quite sure that this triumphant moment in time was something he would remember and savour for the rest of his life. Of course, it was a fantastic stroke of luck but after such a long hard grind, who would say they didn't deserve it? All right, he told himself, you deserve it; now calm down and start thinking straight because it isn't all over bar the shouting yet, not by a long chalk.

The Zeppelin was at an oblique angle, its stern towards them, but the gap was definitely narrowing. It also became apparent that the airship was turning slowly to starboard. "Well, what do you know?" Farr said, talking to himself. "The silly bastard's just woken up to the fact that he was going the wrong way."

They were on a converging course now, the Zeppelin beam on and growing in size. A six-engine job, he noted, and slightly down by the stern. There was something very odd about one of the midships engine gondolas too. Perhaps his eyes were deceiving him but it did look as though the gondola was pointing up at the hull. No two ways about it, the Zeppelin was huge, a leviathan the size of two football pitches laid end to end. Then Farr saw the registration number on the hull and wondered for the second time if his eyes were deceiving him.

Signalling Lethbridge to conform with him, Farr

turned on to a parallel course with the Zeppelin and throttled right back to keep station with it, 2000 yards out where they were beyond the effective range of the Maxim machine guns. A leviathan? Or a tired bull down on its knees, wounded by a dozen lance thrusts from the picadors and too exhausted to avoid the matador with his sword? No matter, it was his to kill any time he wanted, if he wanted. The L72 wasn't going anywhere, he could see that just by looking at her, and suddenly the stricken Zeppelin was no longer the all-pervading obsession it had once been. He couldn't explain why, just knew that it was better to let it die of its own accord.

Lethbridge drew alongside him, restricting his view. They were ten, perhaps twelve feet apart and while he couldn't hear what Frank was shouting, his facial expressions and hand signals made it very clear what he had in mind. He spread his hands, meaning for him to leave it, but Lethbridge read it differently and peeled off.

Berger pulled the butt of the air-cooled Maxim machine gun into his shoulder and pushed the safety catch to fire. Curling his fingers round the pistol grip, he closed his left eye, peered through the sights and took up the slack on the trigger.

"I think one of them's about to attack us, Chief," he said, his voice high-pitched and nervous.

Molders left the intercom and waddled over to Berger, his usual agility impaired by the parachute he was wearing. "You're right," he grunted, peering over Berger's shoulder. "And he's going to come in under our stern."

"It certainly looks like it," Berger agreed.

"Better wait until he's within a thousand yards and then give him all you've got."

Berger nodded, took a deep breath and held it. It would be a deflection shot and he would need to aim off. The plane grew in the sights and he squeezed the trigger. The butt vibrated against his shoulder, the smell of burnt cordite assailed his nostrils and the long drawn-out burst of fire deafened him, but he could see the tracers arcing towards the fighter.

"I got him," he yelled. "Look, he's turning away."

"I don't see any smoke or flames," Molders said disparagingly.

"I hit the pilot," Berger said and started jumping up and down, excited as a small boy with his first catapult.

Farr saw Lethbridge break away, watched him go into a shallow dive and decided he'd better take a closer look at him. Side-slipping, he opened the throttle and went after the American, pushing the stick forward until the plane was practically standing on its nose. "The wings have a tendency to warp," Moorhouse had said, and he had told him they were supposed to, only to be informed that they'd flapped about like two flags in a stiff breeze. It seemed there had been some substance to his allegation after all, but of course he knew damned well that Moorhouse had never subjected the BE to anything like the same kind of stress.

Eyes still fixed on the other plane, Farr eased the stick back and pulled out of the dive. Lethbridge was flying straight and level now but he knew Frank had been hit by the way his head kept slumping forward on to his chest and jerking back again. Then the movement became more spasmodic and it was obvious that Lethbridge was about to pass out unless he took drastic action. Dropping below and slightly behind him, Farr angled the Lewis gun and fired a burst above his head. As though stung by a wasp, the American reared back in the cockpit and shook his head.

Farr opened the throttle, drew alongside Lethbridge and edged his plane towards him until their wingtips were almost touching. Lethbridge shied away from him, just as Farr hoped he would, and repeating the manoeuvre, he nudged him round until they were heading straight for Norwich. He was a sheepdog driving a stray towards the pen, sometimes flying abreast, sometimes tagging along behind, but always cajoling.

"You're doing fine," he roared. "Not much further now."

There was not the slightest chance Lethbridge could

hear him but he went on yelling, hoping that by some miracle he could implant his thoughts in Frank's mind.

"Only another three miles and you can put down anywhere you like."

And somehow Lethbridge found the strength to keep going, and somehow he managed to hold on long enough to skim in over the railway line and land his BE in a recreation ground on the outskirts of Norwich. Then he cut the switches and slumped forward in the cockpit.

Farr circled the recreation ground twice, swooping low over the nearby houses to loose off a burst of machine-gun fire into the air. It was a somewhat unorthodox way of attracting attention but it had the desired effect, and as he came in to land, he could see a number of people running towards the grounded plane. Throttling back, he touched down on a football pitch and, avoiding the goalpost at the far end, headed for the park gates and swung round. Leaving the engine to idle, he undid the seat belt and scrambled out of the cockpit.

Lethbridge was only fifty yards away but by the time Farr reached the crowd gathered round his plane and elbowed his way through, two burly men had already lifted him out of the BE and laid him on the ground. His face was drawn, grey and running with sweat; the front of his leather flying jacket soaked in blood from an entry wound high up on the left side of his chest.

As Farr knelt beside him, he came round, fluttered his eyelids and moved his lips. "Some landing," he whispered.

"The best I've seen." Farr whipped off his scarf and folded it into a pad. Unbuttoning Lethbridge's jacket and shirt, he placed the wad over the wound. "You're going to be okay," he told him quietly.

"I know that," Lethbridge said and fainted again.

Farr looked up at the sea of faces around him, asked the whereabouts of the nearest hospital and was told the Norfolk and Norwich in St Stephen's Street was less than a mile away. One onlooker said he knew a man who owned a pony and trap and Farr sent him off with instructions to bring it round to the park gates. Another

man volunteered to ride ahead on his bicycle and warn the hospital; the park attendant suggested the door to the cricket pavilion would make a handy stretcher and two men lifted it off its hinges before he had a chance to change his mind. A woman fetched two blankets and a pillow from her house and someone else produced a half bottle of whisky. The two men who had fetched the pavilion door lifted Lethbridge on to it. The housewife placed the pillow under his head and just managed to wrap the blankets round him before the stretcher bearers bore him away, sprinting for the pony and trap waiting outside the park gates. The local doctor came running from his surgery down the road and climbed into the trap with Lethbridge; the driver clucked his tongue, jangled the reins, and the horse moved off, breaking into a trot after a few yards.

Farr waited until the pony and trap had turned the corner at the bottom of the street before he ran back to his plane and took off. The petrol tank was three-quarters empty but he reckoned there was more than enough fuel left to see him through.

Sewell turned his back on Corporal Jennifer Cornwall, removed his glass eye and wiped the angry socket with a handkerchief. Although the smoke-laden atmosphere in the basement Ops Room didn't help matters, the imitation eyeball had always had an abrasive effect on the tear ducts and not for the first time he wondered why he bothered to wear a false optic.

"I should chuck the damned thing into the dustbin and wear a black patch instead," he said, voicing his thoughts aloud.

"I think it would suit you."

Sewell replaced the glass eye and swung round in his chair to face Jennifer Cornwall. He had thought her observation uncalled for, flippant and downright impertinent but the serious expression on her face told him otherwise. Embarrassed, he avoided her thoughtful gaze and concentrated on the slip of paper she was holding.

"What have you got there?" he asked gruffly.

"A message from the Norfolk police."

"Who took it down? The duty clerk or Lieutenant Dawlish?"

"Lieutenant Dawlish," she said, smiling.

"Then you'd better read it to me," Sewell said. "I can't make head nor tail of his writing."

"It just says that a German Petty Officer landed by parachute near Thetford at seven twenty-five this morning and was taken into custody." She looked up, frowning. "What do you think happened to the Zeppelin and the rest of the crew?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Sewell told her. "There could be all kinds of reasons for that Hun baling out – an accidental fall from the gun platform or just pure funk, to name but two." Sewell left his chair, limped over to the visual display map and measured the distance from Epping to Thetford with a ruler. "That Zeppelin only travelled fifty-eight miles in an hour and forty minutes, Jennifer," he said, addressing her by her Christian name for the first time. "I'd say that was further proof our intruder is severely damaged, wouldn't you?"

"Well, if I were that German, I'd certainly want to go a lot faster than thirty-five miles an hour."

Sewell double-checked her estimate, first in his head, then on the back of an old envelope which he found in one of his pockets. It took him several minutes to arrive at the same answer.

"Were you by any chance a book-keeper before you joined the WACs?" he asked, unable to disguise his astonishment that she had got it right in half the time.

"No, but I was offered a place at Girton to read Applied Mathematics before I enlisted."

"And you turned it down?"

"Only till after the war," she said.

Sewell glanced at the map again and drew some consolation from the fact that at least the Zeppelin had taken the course he'd predicted. Moreover, he'd been right to order 198 Squadron to remain on standby and now that the mist was beginning to lift around Cambridge, he could send them up in the certain knowledge they had

more than a sporting chance to intercept the intruder.

Dawlish said, "That was Garrison Headquarters at Great Yarmouth, Colonel."

"What?" Sewell turned about and faced the duty watchkeeper.

"On the telephone just now," said Dawlish. "The sound locators have detected a Zeppelin at 1500 feet heading south-south-east towards Lowestoft."

"Pass that information to 198 Squadron and tell them to get airborne as soon as they can."

"They also said that the Zeppelin has been spotted by one of their ground observer posts, Colonel."

"We're running out of time," Sewell said ominously.

"So's the Zeppelin," said Dawlish. "The observer post reported that one of our fighter planes was in hot pursuit."

Sewell looked round the Ops Room. It had been a long night and he'd kept the 'graveyard' watch on duty long after they had expected him to call it quits, but from their smiling faces he knew they thought it had been worth it. Apart from the fact that it would be somewhat premature, he didn't believe in victory celebrations, but all the same, they deserved a reward before they went off to breakfast.

"There's a bottle of whisky in my office, Jennifer," he said quietly. "It's in the bottom drawer of the desk. I wonder if you would mind fetching it for me?"

"Yes, of course."

"And if it's not too much trouble, you might telephone the Connaught and book a table for two."

"When for and at what time?" she asked, frowning.

"Tonight at eight thirty." Sewell paused, wondering if he was about to make a complete fool of himself. "If that suits you?" he added, deciding to risk it.

"Are you inviting me to dinner?"

"I thought I was," he said lamely.

"Then I accept with pleasure," Jennifer said with a warm smile.

Gayer folded his arms and leaned forward, resting his

elbows on the console between the release switches and the inclinometer. They were less than five minutes' flying time from the coast now and he expected the anti-aircraft guns at Lowestoft to open fire at any moment. According to Intelligence, the British three-inch quick-firing gun had a maximum ceiling of 23,500 feet but whether they could effectively engage a moving target at low angle from six miles away remained to be seen.

"You know, Friedrich," Wenke said, breaking a long silence, "the British never cease to amaze me."

"They're certainly very odd," Gayer agreed.

"The way those two fighters flew alongside us." Wenke shook his head. "For a while there I thought they were going to leave us alone."

"So did I."

"Then one of them attacked us and the other ran away."

"Yes, that was most unusual."

The intercom buzzed and Wenke lifted the phone off the hook. Watching him closely, Gayer saw his mouth tighten and guessed what was in the wind.

"It seems I spoke too soon," Wenke said, replacing the phone. "The fighter's back, closing in on our stern."

"I can see it, Herr Oberleutnant," Paulus said nervously. "Approximately 3000 yards away on our port beam and almost dead in line."

"He's overtaking us," Wenke said incredulously.

To attack them head on? It simply didn't make sense to Gayer; not when the pilot had already taken a good look at them and knew there were three machine guns on the top platform. Then as he watched the plane turn through 180 degrees out to sea, it suddenly dawned on him what the Englishman had in mind. "Get down," he shouted and ducked below the console.

Farr came in 150 feet below the target, weaving from side to side in order to make it difficult for the machine gunners on the top platform to track him. Nobody had ever destroyed a Zeppelin in one pass before and should he have to make a second run, the airship would be

completely helpless if the control car had already been put out of action. In any case, no matter which direction he attacked from, he would come under fire from the top platform sooner or later and it was definitely easier to take evasive action when you could see the tracers coming towards you.

Farr continued to weave until he entered the blind zone near the bows where the gunners on the top platform were unable to depress their Maxims any further. Sighting the Lewis gun on the control car, he curled his finger round the trigger and squeezed off a long burst. Angling the Lewis upwards as he passed below, Farr emptied the rest of the drum, raking the soft underbelly with Brock and Pomeroy incendiaries from midships to rear engine gondola. Then, way beyond the stern, he began to make a wide sweeping turn.

Gayer looked round the control car. In the space of a few seconds, the nerve centre had been turned into a charnel house, and he knew they were finished. Wenke lay on his left side, curled in a foetal position, his eyes already glazed. Fiesler was still at the helm but down on his knees, his arms draped over the wheel, his head drooping as though to inspect the ever-widening pool of blood on the floor. Koch was lying flat on his back, his arms outstretched and a neat round hole in the centre of his forehead. Both Ehrlich and Paulus were screaming at him, but it was some moments before he realised they were trying to tell him that the Zeppelin was on fire. When the message finally did sink in, he frantically herded the survivors towards the side hatch and pushed them out one by one. The last to go, Gayer could not recall pulling the ripcord on his parachute and was somewhat surprised to find himself floating gently down to earth.

Dollmann was above the midships gondolas when the fire broke out in the number 16 cell near the bows. Paralysed with fear, the sight of Vermehren staggering towards him like a human torch galvanised him into action, and he climbed on to the box girder above the

catwalk and sat down. Nothing to it, he thought, just push yourself off, wait till you're below the envelope, and pull the ripcord. In that same instant, the adjoining gas cell exploded in his face.

Molders heard the number 6 cell explode above them and knew that at any moment the rear gondola would be engulfed in flames. He looked at the panic-stricken faces of Berger and Hassell and the other three mechanics and realised that if he didn't calm them down there would be a wild stampede and nobody would get out alive.

"No need to rush," he said cheerfully, "we've plenty of time."

Then two of the supporting stanchions parted company with the hull and the gondola tilted alarmingly, throwing them into an untidy heap on the floor. Lying there with Berger and Hassell on top of him, Molders knew they weren't going to make it.

One, two, three, four, five, six; Farr counted the number of parachutes. The Zeppelin was blazing from end to end now and there would be no more survivors. The longitudinal duralium girders had buckled and twisted in the white heat and the hull was beginning to sag in the middle. Two of the stanchions supporting the rear gondola had gone and the car was breaking loose. A bleached skeleton now, he watched the L72, the object of his hate for so long, break up in mid air. Then he turned for Norwich.

He glanced at the fuel gauge, saw that the needle was below the quarter full mark and reckoned the tank would be bone dry in another twenty miles. No problem though; he had enough juice left to reach the recreation ground. Then he'd go to the hospital, see how Frank was and call Laura from there. It was highly unlikely he would get back to St Albans in time to meet the two-fifty slow but there were plenty of other trains.

Farr looked up. The cloud was much thinner now and he could see patches of blue, and the sun was coming out too. It could be they were going to have another fine spring day.

He yawned. "I'm tired," he said aloud, "bloody tired, that's for sure."

A long way behind him a plume of trailing black smoke scarred the clear morning sky.

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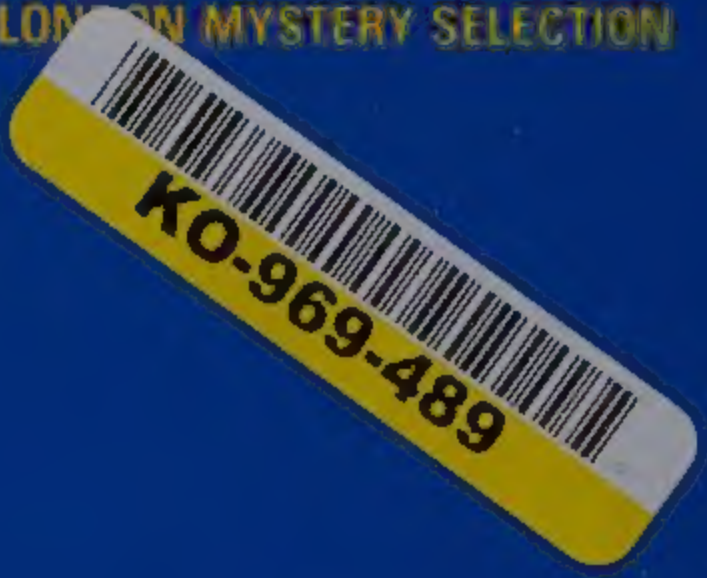

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